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A magazine of literature and the arts

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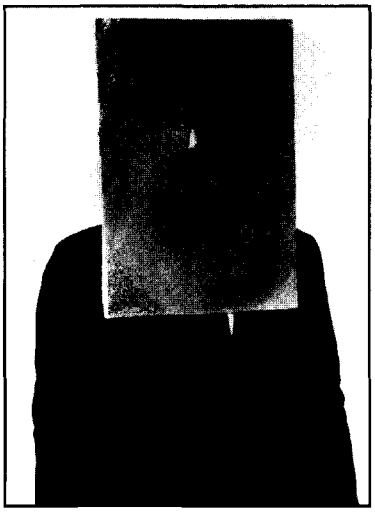

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TO OUR READERS

A new book by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, it will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *Collected Longer Poems.* Copper Canyon Press. $25.00; $14.00.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to thank this organization for its generosity.

William H. Pritchard has pointed out to us an error he made in his review, "Reading Hawthorne," in our Winter 1994 issue (p. 757, footnote 1). The author of *In Hawthorne's Shadow: American Romance from Melville to Mailer* is Samuel Coale, not "Richard" Coale.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

The Man Who Read a Book

After Jerome Bagley was graduated from Maya Angelou High School in Brooklyn in 1998, he spent the next twelve years either unemployed or attending a variety of vocational and pre-vocational classes at City College and its affiliates. He studied computer programming, hair styling, substance abuse counseling, auto repair and maintenance, cake decorating, and introductory Sanskrit, but none of these efforts ever led to an actual salaried position. Then one day his parole officer, Mona Schuyler, suggested that he look into the possibility of reading books for money, and showed him the ad, in the back pages of *The National Endowment*, that told him where to write in order to find out if he was qualified.

He was! His educational background showed him to be the kind of all-things-considered reader that publishers were looking for. He might well enjoy a career in readership if he were willing to make a strong personal commitment and enlist in the career development program sponsored by the Yaddo Reading Institute of Boca Raton, Florida. Jerome filled in the Institute's two-page questionnaire and faxed it in, together with his check for $50. The very next day the Institute's Aptitude Profile arrived, and Jerome began answering the Profile's 350 multiple-choice questions. Some answers he was certain he got right: America's Number One Best-Selling Author since 1984 was (c) Stephen King. Tennessee Williams was the author of the immortal 1948 tragedy (a) *A Salesman Named Desire*. Hyperbole was (b) a rare disorder of the lymph nodes. Others he was not so certain of, but he knew enough about test-taking to rule out obvious wrong choices and then flip a coin. In any case, as the Institute's brochure explained, the important thing wasn't getting exactly the right answer. He wasn't a contestant on "Jeopardy." The important thing was an attitude of confidence, affirmation, and a sheer love of reading.

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Jerome mailed in the Aptitude Profile with a check for $200 and waited. But not for long. A week later he got a signed letter from Mr. Yaddo himself, the head of the Institute, congratulating him on his responsiveness, energy, and knack. Mr. Yaddo said that Jerome's Aptitude Profile was absolutely unique according to the Institute's 7-trillion-byte databank, and he personally promised Jerome that he would be hearing from interested publishers in no time at all, publishers who would be paying him top dollar in order to find out what he, JEROME BAGLEY, thought about their books.

His name was written just like that, with every letter a capital letter. Looking at his name in such big letters, it was almost like seeing it on the cover of one of the books he might have to read. Jerome went to Wal-Mart and bought a picture frame the exact same size as the letter, and he hung the letter, in the frame, on the wall behind his dormitory cot, where everyone would see it.

Then he received a letter from a publisher, Alfred Kopf, who had heard about Jerome from Mr. Yaddo and wanted him to read one of the books he'd published and tell him what he thought about it. For this service Alfred Kopf was prepared to pay Jerome $50. A copy of the book Mr. Kopf wanted him to read accompanied his letter. It was the new revised edition of one of their most popular titles, *A Collector's Guide to Plastic Purses*. Jerome didn't know that much about plastic purses, but Mr. Kopf wasn't hiring him for his expertise but for his gut reaction as a Common Reader.

Jerome found himself a quiet area, far from the TV, in the dorm lounge and settled down to read the book then and there. It was incredibly boring, but there were lots of pictures, so it didn't take as much time to read it as he'd originally feared. When he'd finished reading it, he filled out the Official Reader's Report, stating in 200 words or less his own personal opinion that *A Collector's Guide to Plastic Purses* was not a book that most people would want to read, but that it would certainly have an appeal for anyone who collected plastic purses. He was tempted to add that he'd never known anyone who did collect plastic purses and had never even seen a plastic purse like the ones in the book. He didn't want to seem overly negative the first time he worked for Mr. Kopf. For all he knew, the man had already made a big investment in the book and wouldn't be happy to

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hear what Jerome honestly thought, which was that plastic purses sucked.

A week later Jerome received a check for $50 signed by Mr. Kopf, along with a note from Mr. Kopf's assistant, Betty Kreiner, thanking him for his valuable input. Jerome could hardly believe his good luck. He was employed! Just as the ad had promised, he was earning real money just by reading books!

The very next day he got a phone call from Mr. Yaddo himself, congratulating him on his first success in his career in professional readership. It surprised Jerome a little to think that Mr. Yaddo already knew about the work he'd done for Alfred Kopf, but as the lecturer had explained in his computer programming course, we live in an age when data flows at almost the speed of light, and the data knows, all by itself, where it ought to go. Anyhow, Mr. Yaddo was delighted for Jerome, and wanted to invite him to take part in a seminar that Mr. Yaddo was planning to conduct for a select group of professional readers in his own apartment. The fee for attending the seminar was rather steep, $1,500, but most of it would be paid by a National Endowment Fellowship, if Jerome would take the time to fill out the application Mr. Yaddo would be sending him and return it to the National Endowment Office in Boca Raton, Florida.

"Well, Jerome, what do you think?" Mr. Yaddo asked.

"I don't know," said Jerome. "It's a lot of money."

"It is," Mr. Yaddo agreed. "But faint heart ne'er won fair maid."

"What?" Jerome asked.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Yeah," said Jerome.

"This could be your big break, fella," Mr. Yaddo said with great conviction.

"Okay, I guess so, sure."

There was a whirring sound at the other end of the line, and then a different voice announced, "You have been speaking with the simulated intelligence of Yaddo Incorporated of Boca Raton, Florida. The Corporation stands behind all statements that have been made as being essentially similar to any that Mr. Yaddo himself would have made, were he available. Thank you for your interest and cooperation. And good luck in your new career as a Reader."

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Two weeks later Jerome appeared promptly at Mr. Yaddo's apartment, which was in the World Trade Center, and looked more like a class-space than an apartment someone might live in. He was met at the door by a Chinese girl, who introduced herself as Tracy Wu and said she was Mr. Yaddo's protégée, whatever that was. She accepted the copy of *A Collector's Guide to Plastic Purses*, which Jerome had gift-wrapped as a present for Mr. Yaddo, and put it on a table beside other gift-wrapped presents. Then she led him to his seat in the third row of folding chairs that faced a king-size Sony Holo-Man.

"Isn't Mr. Yaddo going to be here in person?" he asked Tracy, before she could go back to the door to welcome the next participant.

"He may or he may not," said Tracy with an enigmatic, Oriental smile. "Mr. Yaddo is nothing if not unpredictable. But if he isn't here in person, he will surely be here in spirit. We'll know in just a moment, won't we. Now, please excuse me, duty calls."

Participants continued to arrive for the next half-hour, which gave Jerome time to get acquainted with those sitting on either side of him, who were, just like him, newcomers to the profession of Readership. On his left was Ms. Lorelei Hummell, from Yonkers, a single mom with four children, who intended to specialize in books about Satanism and UFOs. On his right was Studs Liebowitz, a gay plumber with a Mohawk haircut whose chief interest in literature was books about the history of pro wrestling. By a strange coincidence, Studs had also prepared an Official Reader's Report for Alfred Kopf on *A Collector's Guide to Plastic Purses*, so they had something to talk about while they waited for Mr. Yaddo or his simulation to appear. At last, when all the participants had arrived, the Sony Holo-Man luminesced, and there was Mr. Yaddo, in larger-than-life simulation, wearing a five-piece Armani Suit and smoking a large Prestige Brand symbolic cigar, the kind that smells like room deodorant and can't give anyone cancer.

The Yaddo simulation blew a gigantic smoke ring toward the assembled participants, which dissolved into purple fizz as it reached the perceptual boundary of holographic space. It leaned forward and seemed to look at each participant directly in his or her eyes.

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"Let's be honest with each other," it said. "Nobody likes to read. Okay?"

There was a murmur of muted dissent and a few cautious chuckles. From the last row of seats, Tracy Wu, Mr. Yaddo's protégée, raised her voice. "Then why are we here, Mr. Yaddo? *We're* all readers."

Ms. Lorelei Hummell nodded vigorously. "I *love* to read," she insisted, turned toward Jerome. "I read all the time. I am an *avaricious* reader. What's he talking about?"

"This is what I'm getting at." It paused. "Got your laptops open?"

"Are we supposed to be taking *notes*?" Studs Liebowitz whispered. "I thought this was going to be more like a party. It's just another damned lecture."

"Reading," said the Yaddo simulation, "is a dying art. It began to die when the movies were invented more than a century ago, and at this point genuine readers are an endangered species, as rare as the white rhinoceros. By readers I mean people who actually sit down a few hours every day with a book in their hands, turning the pages and reading what's printed on each page. It is not a natural activity. It takes training, application, and ambition. And if you want to make a career of it, it also takes connections. Which is why we're all here tonight, to learn to network, to rub shoulders, to earn big bucks."

"Right on!" Studs shouted out.

The Yaddo simulation smiled in Studs's direction.

"As professionals in the book field, we often ask ourselves, why do books exist? What practical purpose do they serve that our computers don't serve better? What entertainment can they provide that isn't better provided by the flick of a switch? Maybe these are not the right questions to ask. Maybe we're looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Because the simple fact is that books exist because there is a gigantic industry that is in the business of making books. It is a faltering industry, admittedly, but it's still huge, and lots of jobs depend on it, our own included."

Studs leaned sideways and whispered into Jerome's ear, "I wish he'd cut to the chase and tell us which publishers to contact who want people to read books about pro wrestling. The rest of this is just a lot of crap as far as I'm concerned."

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"Fortunately, we are not the first major industry to face such a crisis. When the tobacco industry experienced a similar crisis long ago, the Government stepped in and provided subsidies for tobacco farmers so they could continue producing a product that was less and less in demand. The same was done for breeders of Angora goats and for the S & L industry. When the publishing crisis loomed, the Government was ready. Thanks to the National Endowment this country now has more writers producing more books in more categories than ever before, and this in despite of the fact that almost no one reads any of them. Fortunately, paper is highly recyclable, and so after most of these books have been warehoused long enough for tax purposes, they can be made into other books, in the same way that tobacco plants can be plowed back into the soil to grow new tobacco plants."

The Yaddo simulation paused to savor its symbolic cigar. This gave Ms. Lorelei Hummell time enough to raise her hand. "Excuse me, Mr. Yaddo. I have a question."

With a silken shiver of its Armani suit, the simulation shifted into interactive mode. "Yes, Ms. Hummell?"

"I have read a lot of books. I mean a *lot* of them. So I can't agree with you about no one reads books any more. I have a bookcase *full* of books, mostly about UFOs and Satanic child abuse. So when I joined the Institute I naturally expected that I'd be sent books that related to my own special interest areas. But instead I got this book of *poetry*."

A murmur of sympathy passed through the participants, like the wind stirring a field of wheat.

The Yaddo simulation furrowed its brow. "What were the poems about, Ms.—" It paused as though searching its memory for her name. "—Hummell?"

"They weren't about anything at all in particular that I could see. The weather, sometimes, I guess. And maybe somebody died at some point, but that was never clear. I didn't know that poetry was *supposed* to be about something. If I had, I might not have given the book as high a rating. Anyhow, what I wanted to ask you about—"

"Poetry," declared the simulation, overriding Ms. Hummell, "*isn't* about anything. According to one great poet, it just *is*, period. According to another, it's a real toad in an imaginary

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garden, and the poet herself says she dislikes it. So it's small wonder if ordinary people dislike it even more. But that's why people are *paid* to read it. Now you tell me you *like* to read books about Satanic child abuse. And so, of course, do millions of other readers. It's one of the few genuinely popular genres left, because it speaks to the fears and curiosity of every parent. But those books don't need a subsidized readership the way poetry does. Does that answer your question, Ms. Hummell."

"I guess so. Thank you."

"It sounds," Studs stage-whispered, "like we're going to be stuck with plastic purses."

Jerome nodded glumly.

The Yaddo simulation fielded a few more questions from seminar participants dissatisfied with the books they'd had to read, and then it switched tracks and delivered a long speech about the best way to read a book, including practical tips like you should try and sit somewhere where there was no TV and how you should try and set aside the same ten or fifteen minutes each day and make it an absolute rule not to let yourself be interrupted.

Then the seminar was officially over, though everyone was invited by Tracy Wu to have a glass of strawberry-kiwi punch and do some networking.

The punch wasn't free, but Jerome didn't find that out till he'd already asked for a glass and taken a sip. At that point, having forked over five bucks, he felt he had to finish the punch, so he stuck around and introduced himself to some of the other participants, who always wanted to know did he work for a publisher. When he told them he didn't, that was the end of any conversation. They were looking for another book to read, of course, but was that a license for bad manners?

Finally, just to have some fun, he told the next person who asked that yes, he was an editor at Alfred Kopf.

"An editor! That's wonderful," the man enthused. He was the small, nervous type with a fox terrier haircut and beard, short and bristly, and the same apparent disposition. "They said there'd be editors and publicists here, but you're the first one that *I've* run into. I was beginning to think this whole thing was some kind of con game."

Jerome's was not a naturally suspicious nature, but now that

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the man had thrown out the possibility, he had to wonder whether he might not be on to something.

"Are you a reader?" Jerome asked. "Are you looking for a new assignment? Is that why you're here?"

"No," said the man with a thin-lipped weaselish smile, "no, I'm something even worse than that—from an editor's point of view. I am a writer."

"You write books?" Jerome marveled. "The kind that publishers publish?"

"That remains to be seen. Before my novel can be published, I must find an editor who is willing to read it. And I understand, from my correspondence with the Scott Fitzgerald Literary Agency, that to find an editor I must first find an agent, a service that Mr. Fitzgerald offered to perform but only after receiving an initial reading fee that I balked at. For the same price I could publish the book myself in an edition of five hundred copies."

"Hey, would you like *me* to read your book?"

The man regarded Jerome with amazement. "Would you want to?"

Jerome tried to assume the world-weary manner of a professional editor of books, someone who had read dozens all the way through. "Well, like Mr. Yaddo says, no one *wants* to read books. It's a job, isn't it?"

"How much?"

"How much?" Jerome echoed.

"How much do you want to be paid to read my book?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure . . . I mean I didn't mean to suggest . . ."

"A thousand dollars?"

"A thousand dollars!"

"One and a half, then. It's all I can afford."

"Well, that's very generous, Mister, um—"

"Swindling. Lucius Swindling." He dropped his paper cup of punch into the trash puppy that had positioned itself by his knee and he offered his hand to Jerome.

Jerome gave the trash puppy his own paper cup, accepted Swindling's hand, and agreed that they had a deal, with two provisos: Swindling must pay him his reading fee in cash and he must deliver the manuscript in person and not Fedex it. It was easier than dealing dope.

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Swindling agreed, and they met the next day at noon outside the legendary Union Square Cafe. Two of the tables inside served as the Manhattan office of Alfred Kopf, where its top editors lunched with other top editors and with celebrities wanting to sell their life stories and sex videos to the media. The more labor-intensive divisions of the company's business were based elsewhere, chiefly in Quito, Ecuador.

Jerome counted through the little sheaf of bills and accepted the little envelope containing the disk of Swindling's manuscript.

"You understand," said Jerome, slipping the manuscript into the pocket of the 100% cotton White Collar T-shirt he'd bought specifically for this occasion, "that I can't guarantee you that Kopf will want to *publish* your book. All I can promise is that I will read it."

"Yes, yes. But I do count on your writing me a rejection letter with a few remarks that show you actually read the book and some concrete suggestions for how I might go about *re*-writing it. A letter like that can make all the difference when the evaluation team at the NEA is going over my application for a revision stipend."

"You had a grant to write your book?" Jerome had all this while been thinking that the Swindling man was an old-fashioned kind of fanatic who wrote books because he wanted to.

"I've *four* grants," Swindling said, and ticked them off: "National Endowment, United Way, Advocates for the Disadvantaged, and a matching grant that went with the Advocates award from Prose Writers in Prisons."

Jerome expressed polite surprise. "Gee, you don't look disadvantaged to me."

Swindling glared at him. "I have dyslexia."

"Dyslexia" rang a bell, but very faintly. It was one of those words like "polyunsaturated" that someone had explained to him once, probably in school, but the explanation had come unglued, and now the word was like a disk without a label. It seemed safe to say, "Well, that's too bad," and move on to an exchange of numbers. Jerome coded his phone to take calls from Swindling's and vice versa, and then they said good-bye.

Jerome wondered, as he fingered the roll of bills, whether this was, technically, a white-collar crime, and if so, whether it

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would have been called something more complicated than just fraud, and counted as a felony or a misdemeanor.

But what the hell, it was a job, and when was the last time he had a job? Swindling wanted a letter of rejection. He'd read his book and give him what he wanted.

It wasn't that easy. If *A Collector's Guide to Plastic Purses* had been a punishment, *The Last of the Leather Stockings* was cruel and unusual. It just about filled the disk and it was almost impossible to tell what it was about. Sometimes it was about a guy called Natty Bumpo, which made you think it might be funny (but it never was), and other times it was about a woman in ancient times called Madame Bovary, and then for a while it was about Swindling himself, who seemed to be some kind of serial killer, which might have been interesting, if he'd got into it, but Jerome figured he'd have made a better serial killer himself. Swindling had no imagination when it came to killing women. Any night on TV you could do better without even switching channels.

About half way through Swindling's book Jerome had a brainstorm. If it was worth Swindling's while to pay Jerome fifteen hundred dollars to read his book and reject it, think what *he* must be getting paid to write it! So . . .

It was a simple thing to copy the disk and then change the name Swindling, each time it occurred, to Bagley, and Lucius to Jerome. The title also had to go, since the NEA's computer probably kept track of things by their titles. While he was deleting the title, Jerome also accidentally lost the first chapter, but that had been the boring part about Natty Bumpo, so getting rid of it was probably an improvement. Once he'd made that conceptual leap—the idea that he could *change* what was on the disk—Jerome was off and running. He downloaded the latest issue of *I'm a Writer* magazine and followed the advice of an article called "How to Write a Book," which was to write about things you know something about.

Jerome tried to think of something he knew anything about. There wasn't that much, but what there was he stuck into the book. He'd studied hair styling, so in all the parts of the book where Madame Bovary appeared she had her hair styled in some new way. It was frosted and braided and teased up into a

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buffalo and clipped down to elflocks. And where the serial killer was cutting up his victim's bodies, Jerome brought his cake decorating know-how to bear. He sprinkled some choice samples from his introductory Sanskrit course here and there, along with pointers on lubricating the suspension system for an '04 model Toyota Aïda and how to deal with idle stop solenoids. The book kept getting longer and longer, and Jerome began to feel the thrill of authorship, as described in *I'm a Writer* magazine.

He retitled the new manuscript *I Iced Madame Bovary* by Jerome N. Bagley. He didn't usually use his middle initial, but somehow, even before he'd printed the manuscript out, it seemed like the sort of name a writer would have: Jerome N. Bagley.

He did not forget that he had an obligation to write a letter to Swindling. "Dear Mr. Swindling," he wrote, on a piece of stationery he'd designed so it looked like it came from the Kopf office at the Union Square Cafe, "Everyone here has been very impressed with your long book, *The Last of the Leather Stockings*. The first chapter shows unmistakable talent, and the character of Natty Bumpo is very interesting and original. However, we do feel that it needs *revision*! Concentrate more on Natty Bumpo and less on Madame Bovary. Maybe get rid of her altogether or give her a name that is more believable. Also, there is too much sex and serial murder. Can't you substitute something in place of that? For instance, plastic purses. At Kopf we are very interested in plastic purses. These are only suggestions, of course. Basically we are very excited about *The Last of the Leather Stockings*. Keep up the good work. Sincerely, Jerome N. Bagley."

A week later, at his regular session with his parole officer, Jerome announced that he had decided to become a writer, and that, in fact, he'd written a book.

"You've written a *book*?" Mona Schuyler marveled. "What kind of book?"

"Sort of a big one," Jerome replied. He showed her the manuscript, which he'd had printed out on 496 pages of real paper.

She leaned across her desk and lifted up some of the pages to verify that they weren't blank. On every page there were sentences and paragraphs. "I'm amazed," she said. "A book."

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"It's about sex," Jerome volunteered. "And killing. Like you'd see on TV, only I've written it all out."

Mona read the title page aloud: "*I Iced Madame Bovary*."

"By Jerome N. Bagley," Jerome pointed out with modest pride.

"It's a novel?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. You can read it if you want to."

Mona shook her head primly. "No, I'm not much of a reader myself. But you know what you should do, don't you?"

He knew, but he wanted to hear it from her. "What should I do?"

"You should apply for a grant."

"How do I do that?"

She explained.

It took most of the money he'd taken from Swindling to print out forty more copies of the manuscript and Fedex them to the appropriate federal, state, and city agencies and to enter it in the different competitions sponsored by publishers and writers' groups.

The first responses were not encouraging. The Great Writers Society thanked him for his contribution but pointed out that only Tentative Members were allowed to compete for the Harold Brodkey Memorial Award for Exceptional Early Promise, and it would cost him $500 to become a Tentative Member. The Authors' Guild, the Fiction Union, and American PEN provided similar disappointments.

And then he won the Pushcart Prize! The news came in a big envelope that announced that JEROME K. BAGLEY was a Pushcart Prize Winner and a contender for the Grand Prize of $100,000 *and* that his book might be optioned by a Major Hollywood Studio. He read through the letter carefully to see if there were any strings attached, and there weren't, except for a coupon that allowed him to purchase, at a substantial discount, fifty copies of the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* in which an excerpt from *I Iced Madame Bovary* was scheduled to appear. The letter was signed by Isaac Pushcart himself.

He was a little miffed that Mr. Pushcart had got his middle initial wrong, and when he returned the coupon he pointed out, in a polite way, that he was Jerome *N*. Bagley, not Jerome K. But that didn't help. When the fifty copies of the Anthology arrived at his dorm, he was still Jerome K. Bagley. It didn't

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matter. Because there, on page 856 of the *Anthology*, was the excerpt that he'd written, the chapter in which Jerome Bagley decorates a Lady Baltimore cake with the minced heart and liver of Emma Bovary. The best part of all was the paragraph right after "By Jerome K. Bagley" that said that he was a writer to watch out for, and that *I Iced Madame Bovary* was a brilliant contribution to the New Wave Postmodern Splatterpunk Novel, worthy to be compared to the work of Bret Eastern Alice.

Jerome made copies of the letter Mr. Pushcart had sent him and of what it said in the anthology about his brilliant contribution and sent them off to all the places he'd applied to for grants. Then he waited for the results. They didn't come at once but when they did Jerome K. Bagley hit the jackpot. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a special citation for Writers Living in Dormitories, with an annual stipend for $2,500 renewable for five years. The New York State Council for the Novel offered him a Tenured Fellowship in their program for bringing artists into homeless shelters. It paid him $8,000 a year, in return for which he was to give intensive workshops in Creative Writing at selected shelters in the Bronx and Queens. And the City of New York awarded him a grant of $5,438.92 so that he could be videotaped by the Department of Parks and Performance Arts while he read passages from *I Iced Madame Bovary*, which would be simultaneously signed for the deaf.

He didn't, in the end, win the Grand Pushcart Prize of $100,000, but by the time he got the bad news about that, he was already at work on his second novel and he'd been elected to the executive board of the New York office of the American Council for Literacy.

What worked for Jerome Bagley could work for you, too, readers! All that's required is an attitude of confidence, affirmation, and a sheer love of reading. So why don't you do what Jerome did and *earn big bucks by reading books!* If you want to know how to get started just mail a self-addressed stamped envelope to the American Council for Literacy, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C. and enclose your nonrefundable check for $500.

You'll be hearing from us soon.

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BRIAN COX

Lindow Man at Manchester Museum

Called to meet our mayor and mayoress,
we leave so late we fail to mark
the lights are out, our home so dark
we advertise its emptiness.

Councillors in golden chains
gape where behind a shield of glass
Lindow Man poses, named Pete Moss,
his flesh reduced to crisp remains.

Two thousand years ago he died
a triple death, knife, noose and pool;
now we, like cold Arabian ghouls,
grave robbers, find classified

the contents of his stomach, wheat
and barley in a griddle cake,
mistletoe pollen a keepsake
of Druid rites. Today's elite,

we chat about his crooked spine,
defuse with facts the unearthed dead,
this grotesque shape, garotted, hanged,
on show beyond the canapes and wine.

Back home an unexpected breeze
triggers my heart to clench with shock.
The lights reveal a broken lock,
how expert thieves with galling ease

speedily plundered all
our rooms, video, jewels lost;

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the oil seascape my brother bought
an empty space upon the wall.

Most painful, they've taken also
the cheap engagement ring I slipped
upon your finger down a Grimsby street,
shyly, some forty years ago.

In jerky sleep strange Celtic folk
watch smiling while a Druid priest
tightens slowly round my throat
a golden ring until I choke.

Alongside me, you're restless too.
In sleep when you roll towards me
and touch my hand I feel so free
objects don't matter, only you.

In our garden a first thrush sings.
Today perhaps we'll walk across
the sodden peat at Lindow Moss.
We have no need of gold or rings.

Left-Eye Cataract

The world has changed its colours
might seem to you a metaphor.

At midnight bored nurses whisper,
heaps of blankets jerk and snore,
as I tip-toe down the blue-
lit ward, the toilet door
groaning behind me as sleepers wait
to keep their operation date.

Before next midnight I could lose one eye;

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forty to one the chances, good odds you might think,
but in my fantasy this sleepless hour
I conjure up vast caravanserai:
in shadow valleys the white sticks wind
hand on shoulder through limbos of the blind.

At ten A.M. I'm centre of a faceless crowd;
green-aproned sexless things
prick me with local anaesthetic.
Floating above, busy with cutting tasks,
a surgeon offers the nurse a bon mot
about prize orchids at his village show.

Next day my right eye still sees Jean as through
a cloud, but with my left the floodlights shine,
her eyes as blue as twenty years ago.
Kindled by my surgeon's artistry,
I ask if perhaps he could see his way
to name a second operation day.

My world has changed its colours.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Iverson Boy

I met the Iverson boy
on the road. Boy? He has to be thirty
if a day. He crossed over,
faced me, and grabbed hold
of my hand. While I was trying
to get it back . . . "I am glad to see you,"
he said. "How long has it been?"

I said, "I don't know." He released my hand.
"I'm staying till four o'clock on Sunday,"
he said, "visiting my parents."
"They must be glad to see you."
"I suppose so." He looked me earnestly
in the face . . . "They haven't been saved."

*

I had a friend whose wife
worked in the psychiatric division
at St. Anne's.

The doctors were having a tournament,
table tennis. Just as the winning point
was hanging in the balance,
Tommy Iverson came barging
through the door. They could have killed him.

"What got to me," said my friend,
"was that when my wife told the story
she was full of sympathy for the doctors
and laughed at the poor *shlemiel.*
I thought, Why am I married to this person?"

*

When I returned from my walk,

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"Guess who I ran into,"
I said to Miriam, "the Iverson boy."
"Yes? What did you talk about?"
"His parents. They haven't been saved."

When we first came to live in the area
the Iversons had us to dinner.
John said that Richard Nixon
was one of the finest presidents
America ever had.

And after a morning
with Sylvia, Miriam told me
she hadn't a brain in her head.
All that she seemed to care about
was television game shows.

Maybe that was what her son
thought she needed saving from,
shows like "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune."

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MONROE K. SPEARS

Cosmology and the Writer

My title sounds faintly absurd, as if to suggest that cosmology may be the central problem for the aspiring writer. It might be more useful to discuss ecology for the respiring writer, tautology for the perspiring writer, or even theology for the expiring writer. Yet I do seriously want to explore the possible relations of writers and cosmology.

For earlier modern writers, from Baudelaire and Flaubert on, science was simply the enemy. Yeats felt a "monkish hate" for it because Huxley and Tyndall deprived him of the religion of his childhood, and Allen Tate made the case against Positivism in an impassioned lifelong polemic. Few writers now would take so extreme a view; science and technology have become so central to our lives that they must be taken into account. Still, I suspect that most writers feel a lingering suspicion, hostility, or at best indifference, toward science. They feel, as writers have always felt, that, admirable as its practical results may be, science doesn't deal with what is really most important. In *Paradise Lost*, the Archangel Raphael tells Adam that instead of wondering about celestial motions, he would do better to be "lowly wise" and cultivate his garden. In *Rasselas* Dr. Johnson portrays a learned astronomer who says, piously, "To man is permitted the observation of the skies, but the practice of virtue is commanded." However, it develops that after forty years of observing the skies the astronomer has come to believe that he is responsible for controlling the weather—a kind of madness oddly anticipating the great John von Neumann's conviction that computers would enable us to predict and control the weather. (This is the same von Neumann who thought reason required the United States to make a preemptive nuclear strike on Russia.) Blake's "The atoms of Democritus / And Newton's particles of light / Are sands upon the Red Sea shore / Where Israel's tents do shine so bright" is, I take it, another expression

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of relative importance: even if true, the scientific vision is not what matters most.

As everyone knows who has read Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (1988)—and almost everyone seems to have read or seen or heard that phenomenal best seller—exciting discoveries about the size, age, and beginning of the universe, as well as about the nature of matter and of mind, have been made within the past few decades. A very brief summary of the main points may be useful. The Big Bang, paradigm of modern cosmology, was first given this derisive title by its principal opponent, Fred Hoyle; but the undignified name has survived respectability. The paradigm was predicted by Einstein, but he inserted a cosmological constant to keep the universe static (and later said this was his biggest mistake). The Russian Alexander Friedmann did not make this mistake, and developed a theoretical model of the expanding universe; the American astronomer Edwin Hubble observed the red shift in distant stars and produced conclusive evidence in 1929 that the universe is expanding and that ours is only one of many galaxies. Further and final confirmation from a different kind of evidence was provided in 1965 by the discovery by Penzias and Wilson of uniform microwave background radiation and the identification of it as the residue of the original explosion. When the theory was thus doubly confirmed, scientists had to take the Big Bang seriously.

That the earth is not the center even of our solar system has not been news since Copernicus. The significant new point is that the Universe is not static, but expanding; its age therefore is intertwined with its size (to put it in layman's language; both are now established at about fifteen billion years or light-years). By reversing Hubble's expanding universe, we can go back to the initial space-time singularity of infinite density and temperature, some fifteen billion years ago. Interpreting the Big Bang is a fascinating challenge to scientists because it requires bringing together the two extremes of the macroscopic or large-scale structure of the universe governed by relativity theory and the submicroscopic world of subatomic particles governed by quantum theory. Many scientists hope that research in these areas, with the aid of such devices as the Hubble space telescope and

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the Superconducting Supercollider, will result in a final theory explaining the relations of the four fundamental forces and encompassing both the vast universe now dealt with by relativity theory and the unimaginably tiny realm of the quantum.

I am neither a scientist nor a science and technology groupie (one of those who believe that literature and the book culture are doomed and the future belongs to artificial intelligence, holograms, and multimedia), but an intermittent student of the history and philosophy of science. (I find it comforting, by the way, that the word "scientist" was coined as late as 1840, by analogy with the word "artist"; before that practitioners of science were called merely natural philosophers.) I am not concerned in this essay with the speculative analogies between "creativity" in art and in science. Nor am I concerned primarily with the use of science as subject-matter for poetry or fiction, though this is a fascinating and amusing topic, and I confess that since childhood I have been an occasional addict of science fiction. My interest is in what the serious novelist or poet or playwright might gain from greater awareness of the recent developments in cosmology already mentioned and in biology, specifically neuroscience, the study of the brain in its relation to the mind.

Carl Sagan says in his Introduction to Hawking's *Brief History*: "This is also a book about God . . . or perhaps about the absence of God. . . . Hawking is attempting, as he explicitly states, to understand the mind of God." Sagan is here referring to Hawking's final paragraph, which suggests that if and when this final theory is discovered, "it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God."

In "A Brief History of *A Brief History*" (*Popular Science*, August 1989), Hawking remarks that if he had deleted this last sentence, as he almost did, it would have cut the sales of the book in half. Sagan's seizing on this point in his introduction shows his instinct for what will attract the popular mind; but Hawking seems to sense that this is a kind of deception. The

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book is, of course, about God only insofar as God is identified with the physical universe, or as the clockmaker "to wind up the clockwork and choose how to start if off." (Clockmaker, however, is the wrong metaphor; the Big Bang would restore to God the thunder, to say the least!) But Hawking's sentence does suggest somewhat meretriciously a reconciliation of science and religion designed to appeal to the widespread yearning and therefore the enormous market for such reconciliations.

Freeman Dyson is like Hawking in being originally English and a renowned theoretical physicist; but in temperament and outlook he is a polar opposite. As to religion, he says, "I speak for myself alone. Any statement which attempted to express a consensus of scientists about religious and philosophical questions would miss the main point. . . . The voice of science is a Babel of diverse languages and cultures. . . . Many first-rate scientists are Christians . . . many are militant atheists, many are like me, loosely attached to Christian beliefs by birth and habit but not committed to any particular dogma" (*Infinite in All Directions*, 1988). He is rather scornful of extremes on both sides: the arrogant and old-fashioned "scientific materialism" of some biologists, and the claims to infallibility of some fundamentalists and Catholics.

Specifically, Dyson believes "that we are here to some purpose, that the purpose has something to do with the future, and that it transcends altogether the limits of our present knowledge and understanding . . . If you like, you can call this transcendent purpose God. If it is God, it is a Socinian God, inherent in the universe and growing in power and knowledge as the universe unfolds. Our minds are not only expressions of its purpose but also contributions to its growth." This is much like John Wheeler's concept of a "participatory universe," in which "the evolution of subsequent observers through the act of observing the universe creates a texture of meaning which becomes the universe."

The anthropic principle (which is respectfully rejected by Hawking and embraced as meta-science by Dyson) is fully considered in *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford, 1986), by J.D. Barrow and F.J. Tipler. The Copernican principle that man does not occupy a privileged position in the Universe must be qualified: "our location in the Universe is

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necessarily privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers." It is not true that man is unimportant in view of the enormousness of space and time: "The Universe needs to be as big as it is in order to evolve just a single carbon-based life form." The Weak Anthropic Principle shows that "the observed structure of the Universe is restricted by the fact that we are observing the structure." Its size is not random but determined by the constants of nature. "The sizes of atoms, people, and planets are not accidental, nor are they the inevitable result of natural selection." The Strong Anthropic Principle is that the "Universe must be such as to admit the creation of observers within it at some stage" (i.e., it could not have been different).

According to Barrow and Tipler, most biologists believe that man is unique, intelligence "an incredibly improbable accident," not necessarily an advantage in natural selection; only astronomers and some physicists think there is intelligent life on other planets. It is "simply untrue that there is nothing special about the epoch in which we now live . . . We have shown at length that the epoch in which we live is very special in permitting the evolution of carbon life."

Modern cosmologists have no interest in the argument from design. In the first place, evolution is a sufficient explanation; in the second, the argument from design could prove at most only that God exists, not that he has any relation to mankind. Einstein, in spite of his talk about the Old One and God not playing dice and being subtle but not malicious, was and remained a thoroughgoing atheist and determinist. ("I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and actions of men.") The Big Bang does suggest a God with thunder, but the fundamentalists who advocate teaching Creation Science are not happy with it, because nothing after the Bang fits the biblical account. Peter Caws says, "The so-called argument from design assumes intelligent planning, and a great many people attribute to the Creator the really superior, the practically infinite intelligence that would be needed to produce the marvels that we find on all sides in the natural world. But consider where we get the idea of intelligence: the only cases of it we know, in full-fledged form, occur among

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human beings with functioning brains, and there is plenty of evidence that the intelligence really is linked to the brain. . . . " If intelligence depends on the existence of the brain, we can hardly say that the emergence of the brain depended on intelligence.

James Trefil, in a different way, demystifies the notion of "creation": "as seen by modern physicists, matter is just one more form of energy, a form which can be shifted around at will. Seen in this light, the creation of the universe is no more miraculous than the operation of an ordinary nuclear reactor. Both are just examples of the basic equivalence of matter and energy." At first, "the universe was a vacuum full of evanescent matter. Then, quite by accident, enough fluctuations occurred close enough together to trigger the process by which energy is drained from the gravitational field, and the process of runaway inflation started. . . . When the period of inflation was over, the Big Bang had begun and, as they say, the rest is history." He quotes another physicist as saying, "'The universe is simply one of those things that happen from time to time'" (*Reading the Mind of God*, 1989).

What has cosmology meant to aspiring writers in the past? How important has it been to them? While a systematic survey would be tedious, it may be worthwhile to look at a few examples. The Presocratics remind us that it was once possible to be simultaneously scientists, philosophers, and poets: T.S. Eliot was inspired by them, as were D. H. Lawrence, Allen Tate, and many others. Gerald Edelman takes his title from Empedocles for his latest book, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Nature of the Mind* (1992).

Lucretius was, after the Presocratics, the first and greatest poet of cosmology. Though Lucretius was not much interested in science for its own sake, and expounded the doctrine of Epicurus, who was himself more philosopher than scientist, both used the atomic theory of Leucippus and Democritus as a scientific basis. Actually, Lucretius is not much concerned with the details of cosmology; his central points are that there is nothing out there but atoms and the void, and that eclipses are natural phenomena, not supernatural omens. While the gods do exist, they are not visible and have nothing to do with the

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heavenly bodies or with human beings. There must be, he thinks, many inhabited worlds; earth and man are not unique.

He is a great advocate of science because he believes with total conviction that his gospel of scientific materialism will banish "this terror then, this darkness of the mind": fear of death and what lies after it: eternal punishment, hell, ghosts, the unknown. So he proclaims with passion that all passion is bad and that religion is the chief source of man's unhappiness (the reverse, we note, of the modern notion of religion as consolation). He sets out to prove that there is absolutely nothing out there but atoms and the void: no ghosts or spirits or gods (or rather, the gods do exist, but are completely indifferent to man).

Dante's cosmos is Ptolemaic, but traditionally and theologically symbolic. From earth (with Hell at the center) we rise through water, air, and fire to the three infrasolar spheres of the Moon, Mercury, and Venus, representing inconstancy, ambition, and love, imperfect versions of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, imperfect because in the shadow of the earth. After the Sun we encounter Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, representing the cardinal virtues of fortitude, justice, and temperance. Then come the fixed stars, representing the Church Triumphant, the Crystalline or Primum Mobile, representing the angelic orders, and the Empyrean, which contains the Trinity, the Virgin, angels, and saints, but is really beyond space and time, and is where all the spirits really are.

Milton's universe is similar, but looser and not static; it is not complete to begin with, but much of it is under construction during *Paradise Lost*, in response to events in the poem. Hell is prepared for the fallen angels as they fall; they build Pandaemonium for themselves. When Satan flies to the newly-created World (Milton's term for the whole Ptolemaic cosmos), he sees it hanging by a golden chain from Heaven, which is in size like the moon compared to the smallest star. Satan travels through the traditional Ptolemaic spheres of the World to reach Earth at its center. Later, Adam inquiring of celestial motions is given a lecture by Raphael explaining why the Earth, though smallest and farthest from Heaven, may nevertheless be the most important of these bodies. The archangel then advises Adam to concern himself with more important things; it doesn't really

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matter, he says, whether the Sun or the Earth is center. (He does, however, remark that the Ptolemaic cycles and epicycles are needlessly complicated, and gives a broad hint that the Copernican theory may well be true: "What if the sun / Be center to the World, and other stars / By his attractive virtue and their own / Incited, dance about him various rounds?") After Adam and Eve sin, Sin and Death build a broad causeway from Hell through Chaos to the World.

The doctrine opposite to Lucretius', that the design of the universe proves the existence of a Designer, is exemplified by Addison's ode, "The spacious firmament on high," with its thesis that the heavenly bodies proclaim "The hand that made us is divine." But even in Addison's day, the contemplation of the Newtonian cosmos often led—as in Pope's Essay on Man—to minimally consoling thoughts: yes, the design proves the existence of a designer, but not that the designer cares anything for man. The clockmaker god can't intervene in his clockwork. The worst error of human pride, Pope says, is to think the universe made for man, or his world the only one or the most important. Like many other theodicies, Pope's Essay on Man denounces anthropocentrism as the worst manifestation of human pride, an attempt to upset divine order by breaking the great chain of being.

The most effective poetic uses of cosmology in later poetry have been based on images derived from Dante or Milton. For example, George Meredith's great sonnet, "Lucifer in Starlight," which revives Milton's Satan, restores him to his prelapsarian status as Lucifer, and launches him on a flight around the modern world: "On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose. / Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend / Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened, / Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose." But he is defeated by the laws of modern science: "He reached the middle height, and at the stars, / Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank. / Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank, / The army of unalterable law."

Similarly, William Empson (who took a Cambridge First in Mathematics as well as in English—surely the only poet who ever did so?), evokes the Dantean cosmos in "Legal Fiction," fusing it with modern real estate law: "Law makes long spokes

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of the short stakes of men . . . / Your rights extend under and above your claim / Without bound; you own land in Heaven and Hell; . . . / Your rights reach down where all owners meet, in Hell's / Pointed exclusive conclave, at earth's centre / . . . And up, through galaxies, a growing sector. / . . . the lighthouse beam you own / Flashes, like Lucifer, through the firmament. / Earth's axis varies, your dark central cone / Wavers, a candle's shadow, at the end."

Empson's "To an Old Lady" may well be the only good poem based on astronomy (more or less modern in this case), and specifically on the possibility of space flight to another inhabited planet of the solar system (it would have to be specifically Mars). The old lady, who appears to be a relative of the poet, lives in another, older, world of time, customs and manners; it may be observed but not invaded. "Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet / Revere; do not presume to think her wasted. / Project her no projectile, plan nor man it. . . . / Our earth alone given no name of god / Gives, too, no hold for such a leap to aid her; . . . / No, to your telescope; spy out the land; / Watch while her ritual is still to see, ... / Stars how much further from me fill my night, / Strange that she too should be inaccessible, / Who shares my sun. He curtains her from sight, / And but in darkness is she visible."

Empson's "The World's End" is one of the few successful poems about Relativity, contrasting its cosmos with the Miltonic and with extravagant Romantic imagery: "'Fly with me then to all's and the world's end / And plumb for safety down the gaps of stars' . . . / Alas, how hope for freedom, no bars bind; / Space is like earth, rounded, a padded cell; / Plumb the stars' depth, your lead bumps you behind; / Blind Satan's voice rattled the whole of Hell. / . . . Apple of knowledge and forgetful mere / From Tantalus too differential bend. / The shadow clings. The world's end is here. / This place's curvature precludes its end."

Most other poems about Einsteinian space are essentially jokes, like Cummings' "Space being (don't forget to remember) Curved / (and that reminds me who said o yes Frost / Something there is which isn't fond of walls) / an electromagnetic (now I've lost / the) Einstein expanded Newton's law preserved / conTinuum (but we read that beFore) of Course life being just Reflex you / know since Everything is Relative or / to sum it All Up god

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being Dead (not to / mention inTerred) / LONG LIVE that UPwardlooking / Serene Illustrious and Beatific / Lord of Creation, MAN: . . . ." MacLeish's "The End of the World" is similarly a joke, if a grim one: in the middle of the circus "Quite unexpectedly the top blew off: / And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over / Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes, / There in the starless dark the poise, the hover, / There with vast wings across the canceled skies, / There in the sudden blackness the black pall / Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all."

Yeats is the only poet whose use of astrology has been really effective; this is so because he believed in it deeply, and his belief gives a magical power to poems about time and myth, such as "Leda," "The Second Coming," and many others. The astrological meanings are not explicit, but submarine, just below the surface; the reader does not have to be aware of them to get the effect of mingled fear and exultation: that vast and mysterious significances are in question, events of tremendous importance are happening.

Other visionary poets, like James Dickey in *The Zodiac*, affirm the ultimate analogy, or identity, of the poetic imagination and the divine power that created the stars; but for them, too, the astrological zodiac offers much better imagery for the purpose than scientific cosmology. Dickey also wrote a good poem on the Apollo moon-landings, again using mainly classical mythology.

Refusing to be intimidated by traditional sublimity, Auden could say cheerfully, "Looking up at the stars, I know quite well / That for all they care, I can go to hell," and Robert Penn Warren that the stars are "only a backdrop for / The human condition" and the sky "has murder in the eye, and I / Have murder in the heart, for I / Am only human. We look at each other, the sky and I. / We understand each other."

Robert Pack in his poems based on the books of Heinz Pagels, *Before it Vanishes, A Packet for Professor Pagels* (1989), suggests an implicit comparison to Dante. Pack usually imagines Pagels as a kind of guide-companion, like Virgil to Dante, or as a friend (like Lucretius' Memmius) whom he is addressing; but the tone is mostly comic. Pack's book prefaces each poem by a quotation from Pagels: the poem then tells a story or presents a scene that

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parallels or contrasts to the passage from Pagels. The plan is brilliant, but, except for the dramatic ending when Pack bids farewell to Pagels, who has fulfilled his own premonition of falling to his death while mountain-climbing, the poems tend to be no more than pleasant or mildly amusing.

So what use can modern cosmology be to poets? Most poems inspired by it, aside from some of those mentioned, tend to be essentially jokes or light verse at best. The Big Bang is unimaginable, as is quantum reality; they can be represented only in numbers and mathematical structures. Astronomical distances—light-years, parsecs, astronomical units—are beyond the human scale; we cannot really imagine them. The only cosmologies that work for the human imagination are symbolic, and the greatest are those of Dante and Milton; later poets have been most effective when they have alluded to or played off these in some manner.

What, then, have the new discoveries in cosmology to offer the aspiring fiction writer? Not much more than they offer the poet, I fear. No one, to my knowledge, has written well about the Big Bang, Black Holes (though the concept of total negation swallowing even light would seem to have interesting metaphorical possibilities), Cold Dark Matter, the Inflationary Universe; nor, on the other hand, about the submicroscopic world of quantum reality. It is hard to see how anyone could. Both these extremes are beyond the human imagination; it is probably a mistake even to try to imagine them. As Caws puts it, "Everything we have learned about science suggests that away from the normal macroscopic center of things we can't form a perceptual model of it at all. We have grown up in what I call the 'flat region'—and we need to go off into space . . . to conclude that it is round. So in the direction of the very large, the very fast, the very distant, the very small, we can only have mathematical models of how it really is."

Certain other areas of science, such as biology and physiology, have much more promise: they can be used in what is perhaps the basic enterprise of most serious science fiction: defining the human. The assumption of many advocates of Artificial Intelligence that the mind is nothing more than a computer, and hence that computers can eventually become intelligent and conscious in the same sense as human beings,

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has been the basis of much entertaining SF. But recent studies of the brain such as those of Gerald Edelman and narrative case histories like those of Oliver Sacks have shown just how different the human brain is from a computer. At the same time that they eliminate scores of robots, androids, and superhuman computers from the possibilities of fiction, these books should be stimulating to good writers. They make clear how individual and far from mechanical human memory and perception are; as natural products of evolution, the brain and mind belong to biology rather than to physics.

The older naturalism that was the most obvious effect of a "scientific" viewpoint and dominated such novelists as Hardy, Zola, and Dreiser tended to produce a picture of human life that might be drab and depressing, but was at least solid and realistic. The alarming trend now is the opposite: in pop culture unrestricted fantasy seems all the rage, as in Broadway musicals, TV shows like "Quantum Leap" and films like *Back to the Future*, and innumerable movies about minds transposed between children and adults or men and women. Apparently pop-psych books encouraging sexual fantasy as a good thing, South American magic realism, comic books and animated cartoons, and the ever-expanding technical possibilities of movies and TV have contributed to this phenomenon; but the basic source seems to be a vague notion in the popular mind that relativity and quantum theory, together with the uncertainty principle and speculation about alternative universes and time travel, have made it impossible to tell what is real. Tributaries like New Age thought, the mysterious East, and UFOs all flow into this river, where the Dancing Wu Li Masters practice the Tao of Physics and quantum healing takes care of health. All this might seem to be harmless liberation of the child within us, but what it tends to produce, both in visual media and in fiction, is an increasing reliance on spectacular special effects to get and retain the audience's attention.

The fact is what it has always been: that nothing in a story is interesting for more than a casual moment unless the audience believes it, unless the characters are recognizably like us in essential ways and their predicaments, desires, loves and hates can be related to our own. Fantasy must be limited: if there are no limits to the strange powers of Superman or telepaths or

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omnipotent aliens, there are no rules to the game and therefore no interest (at least to those beyond the age of six). A sense of reality, a suspension of disbelief, is as necessary as ever to producing a successful narrative: not gritty realism or depressing naturalism, necessarily, but a sense that the characters are people like us in situations we might conceivably be in. Otherwise, the reader cannot identify with the character.

Science, then, might help the fiction writer define the limits of imaginable reality and of the human as opposed to imaginable other forms of life. It may be immensely stimulating to the imagination. It might also improve his sense of fact, though the example of Thomas Pynchon makes this somewhat dubious: Pynchon's considerable knowledge of science does not prevent him from constantly blurring the line between fictional reality and fantasy, a blurring which reaches an extreme in his latest novel, *Vineland*. In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon made the most impressive use of science and technology that any recent novelist has achieved—not primarily cosmology, perhaps, but involving concepts like entropy and relativity, as the title suggests. As with such other novelists as Don DeLillo, however, Pynchon's obsession with paranoiac conspiracies prevents any sharp definition of reality.

But science is fictionally workable in such novels as Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, where genetics, biology and paleontology provide a means that is just barely possible theoretically (cloning from DNA found in the blood of fossilized mosquitoes preserved in amber to resurrect dinosaurs and other creatures of the Jurassic era) to make an interesting novel of suspense and contemporary social satire (wicked scientists, unscrupulous entrepreneurs who wish to profit from the greatest of all theme parks). Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams* has, somewhat surprisingly, become a best seller; it is a well-informed fantasy based on Einstein's biography, imagining dreams Einstein might have had based on his theories of time and conversations he might have had with his friend Besso. But it isn't really a novel at all.

Perhaps the best SF novel yet written is Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, which involves cosmology only insofar as it is set on an earth-like planet with an inhabited moon—inhabited by all the idealistic radicals who have been exiled there. It is a fine

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novel, but the science is primarily anthropology, sociology, and politics. Carl Sagan's recent novel, *Contact*, is about contact with extra-terrestrials through wormholes (theoretically barely conceivable), and Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), is a brilliant novel about a scientist and more centrally about science itself. It deals mainly with the discovery of the genetic code; its characters are a female reference librarian, a male molecular biologist who did early research on DNA, his female lover, and a dilatory young male art historian. The real subject, however, is the four-part structure of everything from the intertwining two couples to Bach fugues to the double helix of DNA and the four-part harmony of the universe.

Stephen Weinberg's notion of a final theory, justifying the need for a Superconducting Supercollider, is almost as arrogant as Hawking's assertion that final theory would reveal the Mind of God. Weinberg, in an editorial in the *New York Times*, professes exactly the same aim as Lucretius: final theory would banish such superstitions as Astrology and Creationism. But Weinberg also makes the sweeping statement that science provides the only truth man can attain, so should be sought for its own sake. No one nowadays would deny the immense importance of science and technology in our daily lives nor the impossibility of understanding the modern world without understanding them; but the claim of exclusive validity for scientific truth is fortunately now rather unusual.

The greatest physicists have had no delusions of omniscience. Newton described himself as "like a boy playing on the sea shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Einstein said, "Out yonder there was this huge world, which exists independently of us human beings and which stands before us like a great, eternal riddle, at least partially accessible to our inspection and thinking."

As Peter Caws says, "It is not so much that a Newtonian paradigm has been displaced by an Einsteinian one . . .—indeed, Newton *hasn't* been displaced, except at the remote fringes of conceptual possibility—it's rather that Newton never covered even his own domain in the way Laplace thought. Newton could give a complete account of how two massive

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bodies would interact in an otherwise empty universe, and the whole success of Newtonian science has consisted in pretending that real events can be represented as aggregates of independent pairwise interactions. . . . But Newton couldn't, and science still can't, give a complete account of how *three* massive bodies would interact, even in an otherwise empty universe.

"If science can't even solve the three-body problem in mechanics, its most elementary branch, how can anyone ever have thought that it could mirror the whole of nature? . . . The assumption that total discursive adequacy was what science claimed (rather than being what some immoderate scientists and their admirers claimed) has obscured the genuine lesson that science has to teach" (*Yorick's World*, 1993).

It is worth noting that, though the assertion has been made often and confidently for more than three centuries that there are many planets orbiting other suns, no planet outside our solar system has yet been detected; the unseen companion of Barnard's Star is the best candidate so far. The appropriately named Hubble space telescope that is now in orbit will, it is hoped, eventually settle the question. It is also worth noting that, though QED is the most successful branch of modern physics in that it is the basis of accurate prediction and operation—it is the basis of the whole electronics industry, among many other things—nobody really understands it.

For me, at least, SF has lost most of its attraction as its favorite themes have been ruled out as contrary to fact: it is now definite that no intelligent life exists in our solar system, and no planet, much less a habitable one, has been discovered yet anywhere else. If any are discovered they will certainly be too distant for any communication other than radio. UFOs unfortunately do not exist. The strong probability, like it or not, is that man is unique in the universe. So the central theme of much SF—encounter with alien life-forms—is no longer plausible. As James Trefil and Robert Rood say in their fascinating debate, *Are We Alone?* (1981): "Since the Copernican revolution the main thrust of science has been to make the assumption of mediocrity seem more and more reasonable. The earth is not at the center of the universe, but revolves around the sun. The sun is a single star in a galaxy of ten billion stars, and the galaxy itself is only one of millions in the universe. Darwin showed us

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that humanity has been created in the same way as other animals, and Freud showed us that there is more of the primitive in our nature than we might have thought. It seemed that the more we learned about ourselves, the less special we became.

"Now, for the first time in five hundred years, things seem to be going the other way. During the past two decades, the more we have learned, the more we can see the earth as something special." The earth is a planet in the system of a single G star; is in the narrow band about that single G star where water will neither boil nor freeze for the billions of years necessary to produce life; has a large moon, which means there are large and variable tides, leading to numerous tidal pools; and the tilt of the earth's axis is just enough so that, in conjunction with the influence of the other planets, periodic changes in the climate occur. "Although the probability of any one of these features being present on a planet may not be impossibly small, the probability that all four will be present at the same time is. So maybe the earth *is* special, after all." On this particular bit of rock, circling this particular sun, "all of the millions of factors happened to work themselves out so that the first fragile molecules had enough time to form complicated chains, and these chains were given just the right amount of protection to form single living systems, and these living systems changed their environment in just the right way so as to narrowly escape twin catastrophes and put oxygen into the atmosphere. This in turn allowed life to emerge onto land, and since the planet's orbit was just right, the weather changed, forcing the apelike creatures on the African savannah to build tools, fashion shelters, and start to think about the world around them."

"If I were a religious man," concludes Trefil, "I would say that everything we have learned about life in the past twenty years shows that we are unique, and therefore special in God's sight. Instead I shall say that what we have learned shows that it matters a great deal what happens to us. We are not the snail darters of the galaxy—one more life form whose ultimate fate is of little moment in the grand scheme of things. If we succeed in destroying ourselves, it will be a tragedy not only for the human race but for the entire galaxy, which will have lost the

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fruit of a fifteen-billion-year experiment in the formation of sentient life."

Writers can learn more about human nature from such humane scientists as these, and perhaps have their consciousnesses expanded by awareness of the new cosmology. But if what finally emerges is that man and his earth are unique in the universe, this is no surprise. Writers have always known that man (and woman) are unique on this earth. We share much, but not everything, with the animals; what writers have always explored with most fascination is what is not shared.

Auden mythologized the human realm as that of Clio, Muse of History, overlapping with but distinct from the realm of Dame Kind, or Mother Nature. In the light of this distinction, Hawking's title—*A Brief History of Time*—is a misnomer: time, in the cosmological sense, has no history; history pertains only to what has human significance. The Big Bang is noise, part of nature; what is peculiarly human is language or silence. Awareness of recent cosmology, then, may be of some help to the aspiring writer in his central enterprise of exploring what it is to be human and defining the boundaries of his unique domain.

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MARGARET LALLY

Song on the River Seine

We live, as we dream—alone.
—Joseph Conrad

I

Above us, the Tower spun radiant
and high; a white cloud of moths
danced near the boat in nervous light.

And we slipped in silence into the caves
of the Pont Alexandre, Pont Neuf; we clung
to our sweaters. We could smell the wet stones,

centuries of rain; the Cathedral clutched
like a great gothic spider its floating gloom.
Strangers, yes, all of us—our alien

buttons and accents and shoes
covered over by night—brothers and sisters
only in time, understanding just Paris together.

II

Then, a very small song came up
from the speakers.
One by one, voices lit

and lifted it with love. Against all custom,
it climbed and breathed; it dragged
the very heart up toward the stars.

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The song was all of them; they, the song.
It was a thing all Europe seemed to know.
It hovered crystal moments in the air—

bringing us, all wordless,
to splintering streets beyond the pier—
giving us to single paths again.

III

How can I say this?
Somehow, that night never ended—
somehow, that song is not done.

I cannot tell you all, that night, it was,
or what I now recall—
but I can tell you this:

That wine-true song, whatever its name,
stirred the blood of shadows in my bones,
made a quiet child out of my heart.

Beyond words lost and mysterious—
and unseen faces arranged in the night—
everything that is not war, it was.

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Ceremony at Saks

I told you I needed my fragrance,
and you rushed right over to buy it with me:

Propped your hand on the glass,
muttered something that I didn't catch
about kids without food, sprayed
Eternity topside on your hairy wrist,
sprayed *Escape* on your sock. Named
one "*Chat de la Rue.*" Nefertiti,
selling Givenchy, froze,
one hand on the Regitel. I could see
the heads turning and eddying apace,
handbags dripping from wrists.

You sprayed *Joy* on my purse,
on my Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, a crystal
lamp, five flagons, a
Master Charge card.

That evening, old fire tickled our ears;
we drank white wine in our
stocking feet. You told me that folks didn't
know what love was, and
neither did you, would I
marry you anyway. I said that I
guessed that I
probably wouldn't, and two
months later, you
married, I heard.

Occasionally, these days, I spray perfume
just anywhere at all, and I
think about you.

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CORTNEY DAVIS

The Body Flute

O my body! I dare not desert
the likes of you in other men
and women, nor the likes of
the parts of you
—Walt Whitman

I go on loving the flesh
after you die.
I close your eyes
bathe your bruised limbs
press down the edges of tape
sealing your dry wounds.

I walk with you to the morgue
and pillow your head
against the metal drawer. To me
this is your final resting place.
Your time with me
is the sum of your life.

*

I have met your husbands and wives
but I know who loved you most,
who owned the sum
of your visible parts.
The doctor and his theory
never owned you.

Nor did "medicine" or "hospital"
ever own you.
Couldn't you, didn't you
refuse tests, refuse to take your medicine?
But I am the nurse
of childhood's sounds in the night,

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nurse of the washrag's sting
nurse of needle and sleep
nurse of lotion and hands on skin
nurse of sheets and nightmares
nurse of the flashlight beam at 3 A.M.

I know the privacy of vagina and rectum
I slip catheters into openings
I clean you like a mother does.

That which you allow no one,
you allow me.

*

Who sat with you that night?
Your doctor was asleep,

your husband was driving in.
Your wife took a few things

home to wash, poor timing,
but she had been by your side for days.

Your kids? They could be anywhere,
even out with the vending machines,

working out just how much
you did or didn't do for them.

*

You waited
until you were alone
with me. You trusted

that I could wait and not be
frightened away.
That I would not expect

anything of you—

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not bravery or anger, not even
a good fight—

at death
you become wholly mine.

*

Your last glance, your last
sensation of touch,
your breath

I inhale, incorporating you
into memory.
Your body

silvery and still on the bed,
your lips fluttering into blue.
I pull your hand away from mine.

My other hand lingers, traces
your finger from the knucklebone
to the sheets

into which your body sinks,
my lips over yours,
my cheek near the blue

absence of your breath,
my hands closing
the silver stops of your eyelids.

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The Barking Dog

There is a woman
in a hospital
barking like a dog.
The nurses know
it's the sound
of her lungs going
and her heart.
Visitors think
it's a dog outside
chained to a tree,
the rope too short,
no water,
no one passing by.
All day and all night
visitors worry.
Why doesn't someone
bring in that dog?
People give the dog
names, patients ask
if anyone can see the dog
through the window.
When the barking stops
everyone is relieved.
Elaborate endings are told—
how the dog
was taken to a farm
and set free.
How the dog
drinks from a stream
whenever it wants.
The nurses
say nothing.
But every nurse knows
the story
of the barking dog.

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ROBERT HILL LONG

The River Kept from Us

Rain pools on the roof of the museum gallery,
digs between slates, finds the tiny way in:
a rivulet aims down the wall between a Seurat
and a Monet. Soon enough guards will see it,
pull the paintings, close off this wing.
As far as I can see the rivulet threatens
neither painting: I keep it to myself.
The Monet is the third day of creation, inhuman,
water lilies and light smearing still waters,
the world before paintings and museums;
Seurat's trees are infinitesimal points
of drily analyzed August light. Under them
a profiled woman stands staring downhill
at something we are kept from seeing. Seurat
was no more concerned with her point of view
than with the sweat that rimmed her bonnet and ran
down armpits and ribs beneath the immense bloom
of underclothes. Under his vest and straw hat
the same sweat pooled, and sweat vanishes.
He hurried her into memory, cropping the river
she watched. In the studio, he added a monkey
on all fours at the woman's side. Its tail arched
perfectly. The monkey would make people look.

But what holds the woman there is the way
her husband hunches over a slender cane pole
that he tugs, slackens, depending on the undertow.
Pipe smoke rises over his sunburnt bald spot.
Their youngest daughter drowned at this spot,
and he keeps fishing for a gold locket holding
the fine hair he snipped from the girl's head
at baptism. Religious, a believer in the mysteries,

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he wants the final tug that means angelic pity
returns this last small thing to his hands.
His wife stares at his thinning back. For a month
she has brought bread and cheese to his side,
and watched it harden untouched as last light
yellowed the spires of Montparnasse. Finally
she'd take it downriver and toss in hunks
to a lame white goose. The goose now leaves the river
at the small, stricken sound of her voice, lets her
stroke its neck as she once caressed her daughter
and will never again touch her husband. She saw
the man pretending not to sketch her earlier:
he had the pinched, superior stare of a mocker.
Men are fools for miracles. When no miracle comes
they mock. This goose, she thinks, is the one
angel she can expect. The river does not empty
into heaven. Her daughter has been dissolved
into lilies and water-light and lifted
into clouds that are no proof of God breathing.
Upstream, her husband gives his question
another tug and ordinary darkness rises
from the river, but not to answer anything.

The Horizon Pain Opens

No part of the body escapes the pain
and the pain is gigantic. Inch by inch
the painter anatomized pain for the inmates
of plague and syphilis in the hospice
at Isenheim. Pain stretches arms as long
as legs, splays fingers into paralyzed rosettes,
the pain of the feet is doubled by the spike
driven through the arch bones. Pain the foreground,
pain from side to side, pain enough to drive
the god out of the collapsing lungs, out
of the extremities. Behind the giant pain,

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the plains of Alsace dark with refugees
fleeing war and cholera. To pain's altarpiece
the syphilitics were brought, their pallets
laid before it, their heads lifted
by the monks to see the final imperfection
of passion. To consider love and all
it had done to them. What living with humans
comes to: open sores and houses full
of the swelling dead, bones strewn across
the marshes at Colmar and Venice. The body
of pain dwarfed them all as it dwarfs
the mourners painted beneath the cross,
but the pain opens outward on hinges,
the huge pain parts and gives birth
to its reverse. The inmates lay on the floor,
dying and watching, as the great wooden door
of Christ's chest opened to Madonna and child.
They saw the old forgone possibility
of bodies undistorted, calm, wholly given
to each other's good, and the light pouring
down the mountain behind the Madonna's head.
The light, too, was painted inch by inch
because Grunwald knew love has too much
to forgive, when all it can do is touch,
the way paint touches distantly onto pain,
and see that it has touched a horizon
never to come closer. The monks told them
that the painting could be opened once more,
that one other thing lay beyond
and there would be a time for them to see it
but not yet, the monks said, not yet.
On the cold floor the inmates lay imagining
what that horizon of mother and child opens into,
until the hospice was dark and the painting's light
wholly divided among them. They lay there looking
into themselves by that light until they died.

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Burn This

No match, no candle,
you flip a light switch
and the body rides in
to a room of flames.
When the incinerator
cools, they hand you
an urn, cinders
clean as rock salt:
ghost-weight of what
it was to lift you—
mother-bloody,
stunned by delivery
room light—so close
my breath made
your eyelids ripple.
My old weight will spread
through your arms and chest
then: hard to stand,
hard to breathe in.
That weight is migratory
and one day lifts off,
like birds. You'll feel
light enough to see
where the ash is scattered
—garden, river, wind—
no longer matters:
what is not ash
remains in reach
anywhere you close
your eyes. I want
your eyes open
the moment my last self
fits your hands
as your first fit mine.
Where the once of your birth,
the once of my death,
balance in our
likeness of hands.

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JOHN FINLAY

The Night of Alcibiades

I

Alcibiades was the child of the democracy. I say this aware at the same time of the irony involved in the assertion. He belonged to one of the most aristocratic families in Athens. Through his father's side he traced his ancestors to Telamonian Ajax; through his mother's side he was connected to the Alcmaeonidae, perhaps the most influential of the Athenian tribes. He was brought up in the household of his cousin Pericles, who ruled Athens not as a democrat, but, so Thucydides implies, as an enlightened tyrant. Alcibiades himself insisted, often arrogantly and explosively, on all the privileges and immunities of his high station. He likewise possessed in his character that peculiar combination of forbidding insolence and ingratiating charm which we associate with the aristocratic temperament. But nevertheless underneath this solidly formed aristocratic exterior there swarmed all the fluidity and pluralism of democracy.[1] And isn't the last test of a true democracy,

[1] Some might argue that instead of being fragmented by democracy the interiors of Alcibiades' soul were firmed up enough by the Greek aristocratic concept of honor. They would see him, like Achilles of the epic, as being part of that "shame-culture" which E. R. Dodds discusses in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. For someone in such a culture, the most important thing, what gives meaning to his life, is the respect, honor, and glory he obtains from his fellows for performing noteworthy deeds. This is doubtlessly true to a great extent with Alcibiades. But two considerations immediately intrude themselves and undermine the "honor" thus attributed to him. First of all, his egotism existed, unlike Achilles', in a philosophical and religious vacuum. If we can say that Achilles believed in himself and in the gods, we must say that Alcibiades believed solely in himself. The difference between the two positions is great indeed. In the older culture, for instance, there was an objective standard provided by the divinity and the society protected by that divinity by which one could determine exactly what "honor" was and on whom and why it should be conferred. But in the newer culture honor was determined by the discrete individual, and there was always the possibility that the private determination might not agree with that of one's fellows. Since honor presupposes some public agreement in fact as to what is honorable and what is not, such relativism undermines its very existence. With Alcibiades it lost its public sanctions and became outrage. The second consideration is concerned with what-gets-done.

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that is, in the final stages of its self-destructive purity, a toleration of anything, including an aristocratic egoist who once disdainfully told the oligarchic Spartans that of course he knew democracy was a "patent absurdity"?

It was Alcibiades whom Plato most likely had in mind as he delineated the democratic soul in Book VIII of *The Republic*. The philosopher defined democracy as that kind of constitution which has renounced the authoritative guidance of the intellect and embraced a hedonism which by definition is multiple and various—no one pleasure should dominate our soul and deny us the others. The basic animating principle of such a regime is that "all pleasures are equal and must be equally valued." The democratic soul is consequently characterized above all by its versatility, by the presence within it of many styles, attitudes, philosophies, and cults, each one of which frequently contradicts the others. To use the terminology of modern psychology, the democratic soul is ambivalent at its core. It is, though, when Plato turns from the more theoretical part of his definition to the details of descriptive psychology that we begin to feel the actual historical presence of Alcibiades:

> And does he not, said I, also live out his life in this fashion, day by day indulging the appetite of the day, now winebibbing and abandoning himself to the lascivious pleasing of the flute and again drinking only water and dieting, and at one time exercising his body, and sometimes idling and neglecting all things, and at another time seeming to occupy himself with philosophy. And frequently he goes in for politics and bounces up and says and does whatever enters his head. And if military men excite his emulation, thither he rushes, and if moneyed men, to that he turns, and there is no order or necessity to his existence, but he calls this life of his the life of pleasure and freedom and happiness and cleaves to it to the end.

Shame-cultures will tolerate only successes and care nothing for unrealized interior intention, whether good or bad. Judged by such an uncompromising and severe standard, we are forced to see Alcibiades' life as a failure. He never finished anything. He never was long enough at any one place for him to acquire and keep consolidated political or military power. He showed indeed at all times brilliant promise and actually achieved some considerable military successes at the end, but they were not sustained. Whether this was his fault or not, shame-culture would have dismissed him as unentitled to its honors.

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All these illustrative marks of a democracy are derived from a decadent aristocracy. There is not a trace of vulgarity in the refined but corrupting list. Consequently, Plato's composite figure cannot be referred to any of those popular leaders, a Cleon or a Hyperbolus, for example, who rose to power from the lower ranks, all of whom had the reputation for a kind of crude violence. It would be quite hard to conceive of Cleon as applying himself, even superficially, to the study of philosophy, or to the lascivious charms of flute-music. Alcibiades is the only one of the more important of the Athenian democratic leaders whom Plato's illustration fits in its details. Besides, since Plato believed that democracy originates out of a decaying aristocracy which has lost its mind, Alcibiades would have been for him the more appropriate example. In his biography of Alcibiades Plutarch gives the most essential characteristics of his nature as being its open-endedness and diversity, the multiplicity and inconsistency of its passions, and, above all, its adaptability to different foreign cultures and influences. He could "submit himself," Plutarch says, "to more startling transformations than a chameleon." All of these features we see are prominent in Plato's portrait of the democratic soul in Book VII of *The Republic*.

Alcibiades drank the black broth and ate the stale bread of the Spartan mess hall when he lived there in exile from an Athens which had sentenced him *in absentia* to death—"I'll show them I'm still alive," he is related to have then said. He wore his hair long and untrimmed in the Spartan way, took cold baths and then robed himself in the coarse, homespun cloak of a Spartan aristocrat. He sweated through all the manly exercises. For someone so much a victim of a multitude of passions this ascetical regimen must have been the last novelty. But he adapted himself with equal facility and abandonment to the manners of other cultures. In Thrace he out-drank them all in the drunk place. In "horse-breeding" Thessaly he was more of a centaur than the natives. While he lived in Asia Minor he was luxuriant and indulged in the pomps and the ostentations of an Eastern satrap. With cunning skill he moved through all the oily and vicious intricacies of the Oriental diplomatic game in which the least false step would have put a dagger in his back. His entire life seemed only a succession of brilliantly main-

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tained but quickly discarded exteriors, a series of costumes and cosmetics such as figure in the haunting transvestite dream he had just before he died, which Plutarch relates and which is emblematic of the man's whole life:

> One night he had a dream that he was wearing his mistress's clothes while she was holding his head in her arms and painting his face with pigments and white lead like a woman's.

We see the same versatility in Alcibiades' political and his sexual lives. It seems that he was pathologically incapable of an impersonal loyalty; consequently, he could be whatever he wished under the impulse of the time and the place. He successively fitted into the democracy of Athens, the aristocracy of Sparta, and the despotism of Persia. He became a participant in whatever political philosophy he could use for his own machinations. He believed in anything that would further himself. As to his sexual life, he began in the homosexuality of his age, that is, one involving a youth and an older man. He was extraordinarily beautiful. The strange combination in him of a feline elusiveness and a masculine toughness many Greeks found overwhelming. He was effeminate in his dress at Athens, trailing long purple cloaks behind him as he paraded through the marketplace; he carried pet quail about his person; yet he could explode in a second and strike a man down for the least affront to his manly honor. But he had no respect for his admirers and treated them cruelly and contemptuously. He collected lovers as a part of a power game. Their flattery and importunity confirmed the irresistibility of his attraction and the finality of his hold over their minds. When he was older he shifted to heterosexuality. But the same ruthless egotism is seen in his heterosexuality as it is in his homosexuality. He married but was never long faithful to his wife, indulging in countless affairs with courtesans. When he was at Sparta he seduced the wife of King Agis and so violated one of the most sacred bonds of the Greeks, that between host and guest. Plutarch cites ancient sources that attributed his death to his apparently uncontrollable sexuality:

> They say that he had seduced a girl belonging to a well-known family in Phrygia and had her living with him. It was this girl's

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> brothers who were enraged at her dishonor, set fire by night to the house where Alcibiades was living, and shot him down, as has been described, when he dashed through the flames.

Some have explained this egotistic versatility in Alcibiades as an inevitability of the sophistic culture in which he lived. Moral law had lost its absoluteness in the minds of many of the intellectuals and their followers, among whom Alcibiades was included. It was revalued as custom, which changes from time to time and from place to place; its violations involve no supernatural visitation; it actually exists only on leave and for the convenience of powerful individuals who naturally manipulate, dominate, and exploit the weak and the helpless. In those demagogic circles of power that received Alcibiades this philosophical relativism taught by the Sophists became translated into a brutal, amoral imperialism according to which Athens considered herself released from all morality in her treatment of the subject states composing her empire. She could be whatever she wished in the maintenance of her power. Her variousness extended through the entire political spectrum. In Sicily she presented herself to the smaller cities as their maternalistic liberator from Syracusan and Dorian oppression; in Melos, a small island in the Cyclades which pathetically tried to maintain neutrality in the Peloponnesian War, she was the inhuman dictator who massacred the entire male population of the island in order to teach the would-be rebels in her own empire a lesson impressed in blood. A democracy at home, she elsewhere encouraged oligarchic tyrannies whenever it suited her self-interest and sought alliances of friendship with dictatorial rulers of the Persian Empire. Translate this relativistic imperialism into psychological terms and we have Alcibiades.

This public culture was re-inforced by private loss. Alcibiades was fatherless. During his earliest years his father, a famous general of the time, was killed in the battle of Coronea, and Alcibiades was raised as the ward of Pericles. The ancient Greeks placed the highest value on the father-son relationship. For a Greek boy to grow up deprived of it, as many a Greek doubtlessly did, must have made him a kind of freak in the eyes of other more fortunate boys. There is, as Nietzsche tells us, a streak of cruelty in the Greeks. Alcibiades as a child must have

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had his fatherlessness rubbed into his soul. Older boys must have made him the butt of their jokes. He would have been forced to feel his unnaturalness. Furthermore, what could have prevented the boy's unformed and irrational mind from interpreting his father's early death as abandonment and the abandonment as a verdict against his own existence? So attacked, all the forces of Alcibiades' proud and aristocratic nature would have aroused and mobilized themselves. But in his sophistic culture and without the rational discipline which a good father would have given him, he had nothing by which to assert himself but his naked ego. And in the unphilosophical depths of that ego to which he descended he released the compulsion and multiplicity that drove him through all the roles of his versatility.

If this last insight contains validity, we can now understand the nature of Alcibiades' attachment to Socrates. He was seeking his father. And I do not mean the word in a crudely specific sense but in a symbolic one which involves the *logos* of reason that brings an order to the soul, calms its passions, and feeds it on truth. How bafflingly opposite the two must have seemed, the glittering beautiful youth with his perfectly formed body and the ugly older man who had the wisest and most ordered soul any human being ever possessed. Instinctively Alcibiades desired the contagion of wisdom to affect him too and resolve his conflicts so that in the presence of his master he could achieve philosophical peace. We know, of course, that this vision was not realized and that Alcibiades ended in tragedy. No matter how beautiful his body, his soul was finally too infected, distorted, and maimed for it to acquire philosophical form. But while it lasted, in the years before the war—in the brilliant light of Athens, as Euripides says—the attachment of Alcibiades to Socrates is one of the most compelling examples we have of the human desire for wholeness.

Without such philosophical form Alcibiades never had peace. He was of the essence of those Athenians whom the Corinthian ambassador warned the Spartans of in the first part of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War.* The Athenians, the ambassador emphasized, are addicted to innovation. They are never at home. *They were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others.* It was Alcibiades, with the

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earlier help of the demagogue Cleon whom Thucydides terms "the most violent of men," who caused Athens to break with the Periclean policy of defensive containment, which had guided her during the first years of the Peloponnesian War, and to embark on the new one of expansion and aggression. The Sicilian expedition of 415 was the turning point. In the debate before the Athenian Assembly convened to decide on the expedition, the radical restlessness of Alcibiades was pitted against the conservative caution of Nicias. We should consolidate the empire we now enjoy, Nicias pleaded, not risk everything we have in uncertain and dangerous ventures in western waters. But Thucydides tells us that a madness for the exotic land of Sicily, its conquest and exploitation, possessed the Athenian soul, and reason was hopeless against the intensity of its passion. Alcibiades countered Nicias' argument with a policy of imperial limitlessness, a strategy of kill-or-be-killed which would make peace impossible. Under the influence of his brilliant rhetoric the Assembly voted for an expedition which resulted in the annihilation of the entire fleet sent out and the slaughter of thirty thousand men. We cannot fix the limits of our empire, Alcibiades argued; we must be constantly expanding it; and in the presence of our enemies we shall always be making, we must be continuously aggressive or we shall be destroyed. He told the Athenians:

> Remember, too, that the city, like everything else, will wear out of its own accord if it remains at rest, and its skill in everything will grow out of date; but in conflict it will constantly be gaining new experience and growing more used to defend itself not by speeches, but in action.

For the religious among the Greeks such a policy of pure process which has eliminated achievable purpose and which has refused the restraint of meaningful limits was not only impious but also insane. According to legend, the daemon of Socrates warned him against the evil recklessness of the Sicilian expedition. The whole of Nicias' speech was informed by his belief that the Athenians should leave Sicily within its own limits and that if the Athenians invaded the western island they would be transgressing divine sanctions. It would be an act of mindless hubris that would incur the wrath of the god. We should always

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remember too that the western part of the sea was associated with death in the Greek mind. It was on Sicily that Odysseus found the entrance to the Underworld in which he spoke with his bloodless ghosts. Monsters infected the Straits and devoured the ships that tried to navigate the narrow passageway. Without those countless islands which are found in the Aegean and which enabled Greek ships to hug to shores and always to keep land in view, the western sea was open, pure, and treacherous. Sicily to the untraveled Athenian was as strange as the moon. Thucydides' account, in fact, of one of the last night battles on Sicily, in which the minds of the Athenians were confused by the lunar light so that they often ended up turning against and killing themselves, imagistically summarizes the whole death and insanity of the Sicilian expedition. Alcibiades himself was relieved of his command during the very first part of the campaign because of his involvement in the profanation of the Mysteries, but the expedition was always tied to him by the Athenians. It was to his own mind. He was the one who fomented their passion for the tragic venture. We can then understand the justice of that one single attribution that the ancient writers all agree in giving to him: the *fatality* of his charm. His Egyptian soil, as Plutarch has it, produced some good drugs, to be sure, but intermingled with those drugs were found poisons. Aristophanes in *The Frogs* compared Alcibiades to a lion. You shouldn't raise up such a beast in the city, he warned the Athenians, but if you do, then humor every one of his moods. They love him and they hate him, he said in the same play about the Athenian people's ambivalent fixation on Alcibiades, and they cannot live without him. According to Plutarch, Timon the misanthrope told Alcibiades when he was young, and just after he had won a victory in the Assembly, "You are doing well, my boy! Keep it up and you will destroy them all."

The war dragged on for eight years or so after the defeat of Athens in Sicily. By the time it was finished Alcibiades had shifted to every position he could have. He betrayed Athenian strategy to the Spartans. In the mysterious shadow-theatre of the court of the satrap Tissaphernes, as F. E. Adcock calls it, he sought the aid of the Persians for the Spartans against the Athenians and, finally, for the Athenians against the Spartans.

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He cared no more for oligarchy than he did for democracy. The one motive which united him through that shifting and elusive world was self-interest, for him a solipsistic pride and safety of the self in imposing his irrational will upon others. Ironically and tragically that self-interest caused the destruction of the self. He created so many enemies that he lost himself in a crepuscular world of assassins and paranoia. When he returned to Athens for the last time, after his recall and pardon, he waited some time on the deck of his ship, not trusting in the apparent friendliness of the people gathered to greet him, his eyes darting nervously through the crowd for murderers. Can it be that the ethic of self-interest is not at all motivated by an actual love of the self and the sources of the self's true power in the soul? Might it not instead be motivated by a fear of an impoverishment and inadequacy of the self, a fear that then drives the self through all the self-destructive strategies of power politics and forces it continually and futilely to prove itself?

He must have exhausted himself. Plutarch tells of an incident involving Alcibiades during the last days of the war that contains a great deal of pathos. He was living at the time not far from where the Athenians massed their ships at Aegospotami. He had played every card in his hand and now lived in isolation, scorned and rejected by all three of the powers involved in the Asiatic theatre of the Peloponnesian War. But he was a man obsessed by action to the end and so he observed the Athenian navy, knowing that the Spartans immediately across the narrow waters were preparing the deathblow. Alcibiades saw with alarm the general lack of discipline to which the Athenian fleet had degenerated, in contrast to the cool scientific precision and the deadly efficiency of former times. At some risk to his own safety, he was moved to warn his fellow countrymen of the dangers to which their carelessness was exposing them. But after riding over to the Athenian camp and giving his opinion, he was insulted and rudely dismissed by the Athenians. Every bit of his expert advice was disregarded as coming from an untrustworthy traitor. One of their generals superciliously informed him that "it is we who are in command now, not you."

How are we to explain this final public act of Alcibiades? We

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cannot do so by asserting it to be an example of his egotism. He gained nothing by it and actually exposed himself to considerable danger by going alone and defenseless to the camp of his enemies, even if they also were his fellow countrymen. We must then conclude that it was a disinterested act motivated by charity toward the Athenians, who had so far lost their minds as to become utterly vulnerable to their enemies. If so, Alcibiades must then have been groping his way out of the fluidity of egotism toward an objective and impersonal notion of the good such as Socrates would have approved of. But history can be brutal. It was too late for both the Athenians and for Alcibiades. The Athenians were destroyed at Aegospotami. Alcibiades himself was soon assassinated, not most likely by the brothers of the ravaged girl whom Plutarch cites, but more probably, as the same writer further states, by agents of the Persian satrap acting at the request of the Spartan King Agis, the man whose wife Alcibiades had earlier seduced and violated.

2

Why did Socrates become intimate with Alcibiades? Why did the philosopher leave the cool serenity and comedy of his thought, descend into the cave which Plato would later describe, and contaminate himself with the man of tragic action? It is some such question as this that I would now like to try to answer.

We will begin with a fact about Socrates' body. He was physically an ugly man. With him it was as if the creative force had totally spent itself on the construction of his powerful intellect and had nothing left for his body, which then fell off as something unformed and gross. His huge nose was flattened against his face, the nostrils at the base abnormally distended. His eyes were set wide apart and they bulged out from their sockets. For that man caught under their spell, the effect would have been unnerving and frightening, especially if he were also being cut to pieces by the Socratic *elenchus*. Socrates' mouth was thick and fleshy. His bodily ugliness was accented by the oddity of his dress and his habits. He wore the same ragged cloak throughout the year and went barefoot even in winter and, so

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Plato informs us, even during the Potidaean campaign in the freezing Chalcidice when he fought there as a soldier. Aristophanes tells us that when he walked he waddled like a waterfowl. He had the power to withdraw from his surroundings, to stand so motionless in a trance that his face suggested someone dead. But his ugliness wasn't the ugliness of sickness and emaciation. There was something in fact perennially green and tough about the man. His powers of brute endurance were enormous. He sired a child in his late sixties. It was, I think, his physical strength combined with his ugliness which made him grotesque in the eyes of some Greeks and which prompted Alcibiades once to compare him to a satyr. Seized by the intensities of the philosophical quest, he must have indeed seemed like a weird primal creature who had wandered into a disturbed Athens from some savage country of the naked mind. No wonder, some might be led to conclude, that the Athenians got rid of him.

Plato teaches us in the *Symposium* that when a man desires and loves, he is suffering from the absence and from the deprivation of whoever or whatever is being loved. Love then is that force by which the human being moves outside himself and seeks to acquire what he does not have but what he needs for the completion and perfection of his being. When this movement is consummated the emotion of love becomes transformed into the delight of actually possessing the desired object. Now if Socrates was grotesque in his ugliness, Alcibiades was pleasing in his beauty to a degree that the Greeks found astounding. Plutarch states that Alcibiades throughout all the seasons of his life, from his youth to his maturity, possessed in turn the beauties peculiar to each season, going from the vernal to the autumnal, so that he was a continual living embodiment of beauty in all its forms and aspects. Socrates then would have loved Alcibiades because both when young and when mature Alcibiades had what Socrates found that his own life was deprived of. In the presence of the younger man Socrates could enjoy that physical beauty which, added to the proportions of his own soul, would make him complete in all aspects. Since the human response to beauty is the least susceptible of all the emotions to rational analysis—we cannot readily see what beauty is good for and so lack a reason for its effect on us—we

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then have to say that there is an element of the irrational in Socrates' attachment to Alcibiades. Following the Greek habit of attributing anything in human nature for which no rational cause can be given to the operations of an intrusive deity, Socrates himself would have said that his love of Alcibiades was the work in him of the god Eros.

Allied to this is Socrates' bisexuality. I do not wish to be held to something binding in a clinical sense when I use this word. By it I only mean to express a fact which is clear in the historical testimony of Plato and Xenophon, namely, that while Socrates was a sexually adequate husband he also at the same time was peculiarly attracted to male beauty and that his attraction contained sexual elements that actually affected him in the physiology of his person. I do not mean to imply that Socrates indulged in homosexual acts. In fact, the evidence from Plato and Xenophon overwhelmingly suggests that he did not, that he instead channeled the admittedly fierce energy of his eroticism into non-sexual areas and subsumed it under his philosophical mission to educate the minds of the youths committed to him. We have here the origin of Platonic love, the doctrine which our Victorian grandparents emasculated in their great desire to spiritualize everything they could grasp. But neither Socrates nor Plato, no matter how far they sublimated the erotic, ever forgot or disregarded the fact that the basis of the sublimation was human blood. Consider this passage from the *Charmides*, one of the earliest of the dialogues, written when the memory of Socrates was still fresh in Plato's mind. Socrates has just been introduced to Charmides, a youth who, like Alcibiades, is noted for his extraordinary beauty. The boy is now suffering from a headache Socrates is said to be able to cure:

> And he came and sat down between Critias and me. But I, my friend, was beginning to feel awkward. My former bold belief in my powers of conversing naturally with him vanished. And when Critias told him that I was the person who had the cure, he looked at me in an indescribable manner and made as though to ask me a question. And all the people in the palaestra crowded about us, and at that moment, my good friend, I caught a sight of the inwards of his garment and took the flame. . . . I could no longer contain myself. I thought how well Cydias realized the nature of love, when,

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> in speaking of a fair youth he warns someone "not to bring the fawn in the sight of the lion to be devoured by him," for I felt . . . I had been overcome by a sort of wild-beast appetite.

It is inconceivable that Plato should have made this up to the extent that his contemporary readers, many of whom had known Socrates personally, would have been unable to recognize in it the historical reality of the older philosopher. Everything in Plato's own philosophical and moral temperament, which some have described as puritanical, would have caused him instead to suppress the scene. Its evidence of a strong sexuality barely held in check by Socrates we may then accept as truthful. We should also remember a fact which, as with another great moralist, Samuel Johnson, we habitually forget about Socrates, namely, that he was not always an old man. He was only about twenty years older than Alcibiades. He was in his thirties when he first met the boy. Their friendship was carried on when Socrates was in his prime, not in his old age when the debilities of the blood weaken or extinguish the sexual drive. He would still have been susceptible physically to the sexual appeal of Alcibiades if, that is, such a tendency existed in him. Both Plato and Xenophon inform us that it did. We conclude that one reason Socrates became intimate with Alcibiades was the sexual attraction he must have felt for the younger man. Again we encounter an irrationalism in Socrates, one that exists in all other human beings as well. Human sexual identity is rooted in the dark region of instinct. While there is something inherent and automatic about it, the psychologists also tell us that the specific form it takes in us is derived from uncontrollable accidents of our earliest history. By the time our rational minds have formed themselves, these events have been either repressed or obliterated, so that in sexual matters we become governed by the unknowable in us.

But Socrates turned away from such obscurities. He was a philosopher, not a victim of his psychology. As we have noted, he sublimated the powerful erotic force he discovered in himself and disciplined it so that he was able to direct it to philosophical ends. The testimony of Plato and Xenophon unambiguously asserts this. But exactly what philosophical

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form did this sublimation take and how was Alcibiades related to it?

Socrates began his intellectual life as a student of that kind of nonexperimental and excessively theoretical physical science which was what philosophy consisted of in the earliest stage of its development. Such philosophy sought to discover the one basic element that underneath the diversity and multiplicity apparent to the senses composed the stuff of the physical world. But with neither the right instruments of investigation nor a properly thought-out scientific method to guide them, the philosophers lost themselves in what we can call systematic and theoretical unrealities. At some decisive but now indeterminable point in his life Socrates became dissatisfied with this kind of knowledge. He might have felt instinctively what Plato would later believe consciously, that no science in the real sense of the word is possible of anything so subjected to change as atomic matter. We do know that he thought the physicists neglected important and immediate realities for those Socrates considered remote, problematical, and practically useless. Why go off into fine-spun problems, he must have asked, and disregard essentials at hand and at home? But he meant no disparagement of such knowledge, as he said in the *Apology*, thus disassociating himself from anti-intellectualism and from the popular superstition which judged such science as subversive to religious authority. It was just finally irrelevant to what had become the main preoccupation of his life, the knowledge of what is necessary to live a good life here and now. In so placing this moral knowledge of the good as the central concern of his mind Socrates initiated a revolution in Greek systematic thought. He shifted it away from the detached, morally disengaged contemplation of what we would now call pure science and introduced it to the conduct of this life. As Cicero said, Socrates brought philosophy down from the sky and set it up in the streets and in the houses of men.

It is the nature of the good that it seeks to diffuse itself into all areas where it may possibly proceed. If it decided to hold itself aloof from those areas and so deprive them of its benefits, it would then be wishing them evil since evil is not some positive force of its own, but merely an absence of the good. But this is impossible. It would defy the law of contradiction. Nothing can

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be both good and evil at the same time and under the same aspect. Therefore, the good seeks by its nature to diffuse itself. This doctrine receives its fullest articulation in the Christian doctrine of creation. The divine goodness created a universe that contains all conceivable degrees of participation in the good, beginning with the angels closest to God, descending to the mediocrity of man, and plunging, if you will, into creatures which seem the slime of the universe but which yet, through at least the pure fact of their existence, are able to receive the last degree of the good. As we have seen, the controlling passion in Socrates' life was for the good. He thought of his philosophical mission as the attempt to define the good so that others of the city might understand it and live a good life according to the knowledge. If he had not been born and reared in Athens, the intellectual capital of his world, he would have had to go there as Jesus finally went up to Jerusalem where the benefits of his sacrifice would be most extensively felt. It is, in fact, inconceivable that Jesus or Socrates should have spent his life in some obscure village. Both required the great city, the capital of each man's world where the greatest concentration of power, the greatest diffusion of good were possible.

And what better agent of moral and intellectual diffusion could there have been for Socrates than Alcibiades, that is, the Alcibiades the boy promised to be, the one who existed in Socrates' hopeful mind before the poisons grew in Alcibiades and destroyed him? The Greeks never envisioned the moral life as being transacted by some isolated conscience in its privacy, the etymology of which in Greek means idiocy. One's moral life and one's public life were for them the same. "We alone," Pericles said of the Athenians in the great funeral speech as related by Thucydides, "regard the man who takes no part in public affairs not as a harmless but as a useless person." Alcibiades as a youth must have struck all who could understand and who came into contact with him, not only Socrates, as being potentially the man who could acquire complete political control of the city—so that if he were good, the city would likewise be good. He came from one of the great families; he possessed the keenest of minds and was receiving the best education Athens provided; from his earliest years he instinctively knew the ways of power and, besides, exuded the

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magnetism that captivates, sways, and compels the intoxicated multitude. We are now in possession of the sublimated reason for Socrates' love of Alcibiades. He became intimate with the youth because he hoped, tragically it turned out, that through him ethics could be fused with politics, knowledge with power, so that the greatest degree of the good could be effected in the city. It was in the service of accomplishing this end that Socrates consigned the raw energy of his eroticism and so baptized it in philosophy. He did so undogmatically, not by virtue of some positive knowledge he enjoyed, but by the nature of the good he sought but always said he himself never possessed. But Alcibiades died even before his older friend, assassinated among barbarians in Asia. His whole life had turned out to be one violation after another of the good Socrates had lived for. The memory of what the boy could have been but the man never became must have given Socrates some of his bitterest moments in prison as he awaited his own execution.

3

To understand Alcibiades' connection with the execution of Socrates, we must go back to the last stages of the Peloponnesian War and to two oligarchical revolutions which occurred in Athens, one in 411, the other in 404. The central purpose of the first of these, called the Revolution of the Four Hundred, was to procure the financial and military aid of the Persian satrap Tissaphernes, which the Athenians desperately needed in their war against Sparta. But they would never secure the aid, Alcibiades informed them, as long as democracy existed at Athens to offend the despotic sensibilities of the rich Easterners. Abolish the democracy, Alcibiades promised his alienated countrymen whose favor he wished to regain, and he would get for them the friendship of the Persians in their death-struggle with Sparta. The last of the two revolutions was brought about at the very end of the war by the so-called Thirty. Again, a small band of aristocrats seized power in the city, demolished the democratic constitution, ruled briefly as a self-destructive tyranny, and subjected the state to terror.

Though the two revolutions each lasted for only a short time,

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the memory of them persisted with full strength in the collective mind of Athens. The experience had been bitter. The revolutions had been infected with that systemic disease of all Greek political life. I mean the unwillingness, even the stubborn refusal, of the ancient Greeks to form impersonal political loyalties, and the consequent fragmentation of their polity into sects formed to gratify personal grudges and to carry out endless vendettas. Fratricide marked the revolutions, and judicial murders were a matter of course. The same paranoia of paralysis occurred in both. No one could trust his neighbor not to betray him to the government. Everyone lied for fear that the truth would have fatal consequences for him. The whole spirit of the people was extinguished in the silence and inactivity which the tyrants murderously imposed. And so it is understandable that after the fall of the Thirty the restored democracy would have wanted its revenge, especially after the city had also suffered the annihilation of her entire navy, the consequent surrender to Sparta, and the final humiliation of having the very walls of the proud city torn down by the victorious Spartans so that she now lay exposed to anyone.

It was the leadership of these two revolutions which related most directly to the execution of Socrates. Nearly all the plotters belonged to aristocratic and intellectual circles at the highest levels of Athenian society. These circles had always accepted Socrates as their own. Some of the revolutionaries had been his closest friends. He himself had been an unrelenting critic of the democracy. It is true that he also opposed the injustices of the oligarchical Thirty, but the popular mind chooses what it wishes to believe and emphasize, and the Socratic gibes against popular rule stuck in the sensitive democratic mind and festered. Above all Alcibiades cast the longest and deepest shadow. He wasn't involved in the last revolution—by then he had been assassinated—but it was his promise of Persian aid that had brought the first revolution to life and had given it its reason to exist. He did indeed later shift sides and embraced the very democracy he had earlier tried to subvert, but what was that but more evidence of his elusiveness and changeability? The democracy held Socrates responsible for the corruptions of Alcibiades. Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* refers to a contemporary writer named Polycrates who wrote a

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violent attack on Socrates. According to Xenophon, Polycrates in justifying the people's execution of Socrates pointed to the philosopher's "friendship" with the "unprincipled and licentious" Alcibiades and to the great injuries the latter had done the Athenian state under the influence of the philosopher. G. C. Field in his *Plato and His Contemporaries* summarizes the controversies which arose out of the attacks of Polycrates:

> For there is evidence that Socrates' relation to Alcibiades was a subject that excited great interest in the Socratic controversies of the time. It was an important element in the accusation of Polycrates that Socrates was responsible for Alcibiades and all the evil he had done. And it is quite likely that a similar accusation was also brought at the actual trial.

The friends of Socrates who defended him after his death constantly and single-mindedly assert that the degeneration of Alcibiades occurred not because of but in spite of Socrates. A fragment of Antisthenes survives in which that minor Socratic philosopher, exculpating his friend, criticizes the character of Alcibiades as vitiated by such terrible passions that even the influence of Socrates was unable to subjugate them. And in a fragment of Aeschines, an orator who had been another friend of Socrates, we find the following dramatic passage in which Socrates himself speaks to defend himself against the implied accusation of corrupting the youth:

> For my part, the love I bore to Alcibiades brought me an experience just like that of the Bacchae. They, when they are inspired, draw honey and milk in places where others cannot even draw water from wells. Similarly I, though I have learned nothing that I could impart to a man to do him good, nevertheless thought that, because I loved him, my company could make him a better man.

That all these writers felt compelled to answer the same charge proves that Alcibiades was central in the Athenian mind as it tried and executed Socrates, then justified itself afterwards. The bill of complaint against Alcibiades would have indeed been a detailed one. It stretched back for more than fifteen years and included the profanation of the Mysteries immediately before the Sicilian expedition, an act which the mass of Athenians would have thought polluted the very existence of

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the state. The rest of his betrayals and treasons we have already noted, as well as the mad passion he constantly fomented in the Athenian soul for a bitter war that finally ended in the tragedy of Aegospotami. The democracy had always both loved and hated the man, fatally drawn to him and repelled at the same time—he had been the spoiled child of the democracy—and in the irresolution of its contradictory emotions Alcibiades had eluded its justice and escaped punishment for his outrages. Besides, he was now dead. But who was that old man who had been ceaselessly at his side during all his youth, the one who had insultingly pitted aristocratic skill and knowledge against democratic incompetence and mere belief?

Others connected with Socrates were implicated. Critias, a first cousin of Plato's mother and a familiar of the Socratic circle, was a ringleader of the Thirty, as was also Charmides, Plato's uncle and that same beautiful youth whom we met earlier in the wrestling-school, the one in the insides of whose cloak Socrates spied the boy's cock and had thereby been inflamed. Xenophon quotes Polycrates as calling Critias "the most rapacious and violent figure of the oligarchy." Xenophon also tells us that "it was Socrates himself who first encouraged Charmides to overcome his bashfulness and take part in politics," without realizing the tragic consequences it would have for the youth, who with Critias was killed in the last battle of the Thirty. The popular mind which condemned Socrates would quite deliberately have deceived itself, misjudging Socrates' involvement with these men as all the evidence it needed for his own treason. The popular mind was not in any mood to distinguish fairly and justly between Socrates' mere friendship with the oligarchical revolutionaries and an actually criminal complicity with their thefts and murders. As we have noted, the people had just been defeated in a war that had lasted for more than a quarter of a century. They were exhausted, disillusioned, angry, and bitter. The Alcibiadeses of their politics had all but annihilated them. They needed a scapegoat, and what better candidate for the job was there than Socrates, the eternal babbler and questioner, the prying and irritating gadfly who had disturbed social peace for too long with his search after imaginary wisdom and imaginary virtue, the very one who loved, schooled and groomed those scintilat-

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ing youths who had proved to be the bane of Athens? Let him collect on his ugly body the fears and sins of the people so they could be done with them and return to the proper business of this world. And so Socrates was put to death and the democracy got its revenge.

At the end of Plato's *Symposium* Alcibiades abruptly and unexpectedly intrudes on the party. It is one of the great scenes. He stands there framed intoxicated on the threshold, his head crowned with ivy and violets, among which brilliant ribbons are meandering over his hair. All eyes are directed to him. A flute-girl helps the drunk youth into the room. Later he gives a speech about Socrates to the guests, of whom Socrates is one. Socrates is the only man, he says, who can make him ashamed of himself. Socrates has wounded and stung him in his soul "by philosophical talk which clings more fiercely than a snake when it gets hold of a not ill-endowed young man." Socrates compels Alcibiades "to realize that I am still a mass of imperfections and yet persistently neglect my own true interests by meddling with the affairs of the state before my time." He further tells the guests of that night he once spent with the man. He was deliberately trying to seduce him sexually. He wished to tear through the philosophical facade and to discover in the hidden parts of Socrates the same blinding sensuality which would make the man just as compulsive and messy as everybody else. But Alcibiades discovered in the interior of Socrates' soul, instead, self-control and an imperturbable calm:

> But in spite of all my efforts he proved completely superior to my charms and triumphed over them and put them to scorn, insulting me in the very point on which I piqued myself . . . I swear by all the gods in heaven that for anything that had happened between us when I got up after sleeping with Socrates, I might have been sleeping with my father or elder brother.
>
> What do you suppose to have been my state of mind after that? On the one hand I realized that I had been slighted, but on the other I felt reverence for Socrates' character, his self-control and courage; I had met a man whose like for wisdom and bravery I could never have expected to encounter. The result was that I could neither bring myself to be angry with him and tear myself away from his society, nor find a way of subduing him to my will. It was clear . . . that he was more completely proof against bribes than Ajax against sword-wounds, and in the one point in which I had

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> expected him to be vulnerable he had eluded me. I was utterly disconcerted, and wandered about in a state of enslavement to the man the like of which has never been experienced.

I could not bring myself to be angry with him. So Alcibiades did feel some anger against Socrates, of the kind which disordered persons experience in the presence of those whose ordered lives are a standing reproof to their own. They love the ordered man since he has that which will save them from themselves and which they desire. They hate him to the extent that a despair has seized them that finally they cannot be saved, that the irrational principle in them has been fed like a beast with too much and is now too strong to resist and overcome. The pain of denying the beast is far greater than the pleasure of the incipient good only beginning to be formed. Disordered persons suffer a contradiction in their inner being. And their actions will reflect the contradiction. At the same time they will cleave to the ordered man and seek to destroy him, each impulse checked by the other. Some sort of resolution will eventually be found by the victim, but one not worked out by his conscious will. Our actions often contain consequences uncontrollable by us which oppose all our conscious intentions and act out some of our most buried and suppressed impulses and desires. It is this uncontrollability and compulsion which frequently make history a tragedy that can only be redeemed by the freedom of philosophic thought. It was the ghost of the dead Alcibiades, the one who existed as an inevitable historical consequence in the imagination of the democracy, who finally reached out of Hades and removed the disturbing philosopher by death from Athens. The political actions of Alcibiades, all proceeding from a ruthless egotism and a bewildering versatility and fluidity, indirectly seized and polluted Socrates and brought him down too. Thus Socrates paid an enormous price for that sexually uneventful night he spent with Alcibiades. Did he have something like this in mind when he made his last statement? As the mortal chill was spreading up from his legs to his waist, he pulled back from his face the sheet that he had placed there and told his friend Crito that he owed a cock to Asclepius. Did he mean by this debt of gratitude to the god of health and medicine that he believed human existence was

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fundamentally diseased by passion and that death alone could heal us, as it was then about to heal him? And yet the mind of Socrates had remained unpolluted by Alcibiades, no matter what the restored democracy might think, and his whole life was a comedy in the old sense of the word, not a tragedy. The democracy had simply made a blind error. Its immorality, as Socrates himself would have said, was the result of ignorance alone. It was resolving its own ambivalent fixation on Alcibiades by executing the lover and teacher of the unforgettable young man.

I referred earlier to Socrates' ugliness, his unconventionality and uncouthness. But such is only one half of the truth. The other half is an amazing courtesy in the man, a fluidity of ease in human encounters, a mordant wit perfectly balanced with a natural kindness. He has to be the most social of the philosophers. He could engage in the smoothest and most meaningless banter of the symposia, fight it out verbally with the thugs and bullies of the street, and philosophize with logical precision and emotional intensity on the graver problems of human life and death with closer friends. His severe intellectualism was furthermore balanced by religious faith. He revered the powers of the conscious intellect and saw in the clarities of the rational the natural source of virtue. "A man is good in so far as he is wise," he was reported to have once said, "evil in so far as he is stupid." At the same time he respected and obeyed the *daemon* that spoke to him out of his irrational unconsciousness. Above all, it is the courtesy of wholeness that most impresses us about this complex and endlessly fascinating man who holds us more than any other person except Jesus. "Be always to thy gathered self the same," Ben Jonson commands us in one of his epigrams. And Aristotle speaks of the internal friendship of the mind with itself in which no faculty of our mental being is in conflict with another, but all powers exist together in peace, the emotions and desires in subordination to their own good under the rule of reason—an aristocracy of the psyche. Multiple difference and variance at the very core of our being indicate a traumatic fragmentation of the mind against itself that soon will cause extreme anguish. Socrates possessed this wholeness and self-control to a pre-eminent degree, and without a trace of puritanical self-hatred or ascetical desolation—his morals are

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happily unembarrassed by pleasure. Through his wholeness he was able to withstand the seduction of Alcibiades and to face his executioners with a courtesy which must have infuriated them.

What is the ultimate source of Socrates' inner strength? It was his belief that he himself was not his body but his mind. When he came to make the philosophically most exact definition of human identity, he turned away from the body with its multiple, different, and decomposing parts—that which we cannot *know* since it constantly suffers change in its sublunar vagueness—and went instead to the immaterial intellect. There in the mind he located who we really are. The body, Socrates believed, is merely the tool or vestment of the soul. He would not take the body for the self any more than he would take any instrument for its agent or user. The soul contains our essence; the body is its accident. He furthermore believed that since the intellect possesses unity and is immaterial, it also is deathless. Death means the dissolution of those material parts which just happen to have a temporary but unessential cohesion. But if something is not composed of material parts but instead is a unity, it cannot suffer their dispersion and will never die. And if the mind is deathless, it is also for Socrates divine, since the deathless and the divine mean the same for him, as they do in all of Greek thought and culture. From his belief in this immortal and god-like intellectual principle in him Socrates derived his inner strength, his self-control, his courtesy of wholeness. It explains the actual meaning of his pregnant sentence that no evil can happen to a good man in this life or in the next. For how could it if the man is such a soul? And so the inexpert and tragically blind and misguided democracy could poison and kill his body—Plato in scathing disgust would call his trial that of a doctor indicted and prosecuted by cookie-makers in front of a jury of children—but the executioners couldn't reach the man. Even as the hemlock was coursing through his blood, Socrates was already somewhere else in the indestructible cohesion of the undivided intellect. He maintained the enigmatic and baffling smile of the archaic Ionians, the refined and electric comedy of philosophy up until and beyond the very end.

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MADELEINE MYSKO

Out of Blue

For Elizabeth Spires

It wasn't wind or thunder: color foretold
A summer storm. The orange tiger lily,
The yellow black-eyed Susan, the pink phlox
Were too much themselves in the charged light.
The trees to the west sharpened against the sky.
The sky was exaggerated, a purple hue.

I set out to gather toys from the yard
And towels from the line, but passing the hedge,
Was struck by hydrangea blue. I felt it travel,
Through me, toward the ground of a day
I couldn't quite remember, and I was left
Bewildered, bereft of I didn't know what.

I had to lean into the broad leaves, to reach
Deep and snap stems until my arms
Were filled with blooms big as baby bonnets.
The broken-green odor blessed the air
As I carried that crucial blue across the lawn,
And the maples blanched at the first gust of wind.

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For Bill

No one but you could write,
"Our Father Who art in Heaven
can lick their Father Who art
in Heaven."
After we laughed,
we saw all wars from Troy
to Vietnam in those two lines.
You had that gift of turning
smiles into thoughts in such
a quiet Quaker way.
And yet
the saying stayed so casual
and conversational and untranslatably
Bill Stafford.
I still remember
when we read in Michigan
together—you from a spiral
notebook crammed with short
poems in longhand.
Listening,
I strove to spot where the poems
stopped, and the prose began.
I never found the seam . . .
When you wrote *Someday, Maybe,*
what was it you were telling us?
If it was loss, that day
was yesterday.
You finished polishing
a poem that would be your last,
stood up to help your wife
and fell like a soldier.
As endings

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go, that seems regrettably
acceptable.
But why does it
remind me of the silence following
a poem's final line?
I want the poem to go on
forever, but it doesn't.
And it does.

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ALLEN HOEY

Up Before Dawn

Five days before we move, we narrowly avoid
quarreling about the state of our souls—she's lost
ground, she tells me, voice mulled with too much wine,
this constant bickering about the unalterable
ways things are affronts her sense of God's pervasive
benevolence—when I take myself to bed. At four
she draggles from the couch, and I lie beside her
body heaving back down like mine four hours before,
but muscles tingle, I shift from side to side, finally
give it up and go downstairs; the first robins
carol hidden in the limbs of maples up and down
the block. Tucked between the flyleaves
of my late great-uncle's Bible, I find
a prayer scrawled in an unfamiliar hand:
May the deed become strength / May the light
become wisdom / May the world become
goodness / When faithfully we serve the spirit.
A little grey has filtered through the maples,
the choir of birds increased, so I ease the back door
closed behind me. Where the creek
upsets the steady grid of streets, cutting
a wider gap in the canopy of trees,
the air brightens, the green of water
shining as with a soft light beneath the current.
Two ducks muddle from under overhanging limbs,
too dark still to make their species out, but they
look too much the same for mallards yet act too much
like mates: that quiet but insistent
gabbling, worrying the other with their beaks,
then paddling to a distance to pretend
only the current draws them back.

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Suppose

Suppose remembering was all that kept
a thing from fading from the world,
like old Polaroid photographs if you failed
to apply the fixative. My children,
the flowering acacia and its storm of petals
drifted on the patio, the stray dog I saw
yesterday beside the SafeWay dumpster,
the man who owned the restaurant where I
so loved to eat my week in Arles—all of them
blurring and one day gone if no one
held them fixed in memory. Who could live
with that responsibility—preserving
each thing seen and, if for a moment, cherished?
Or, maybe worse, the burden of preserving
even those words uttered yesterday in anger
longer than the moment took to pass.

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PATRICIA GOEDICKE

Stream

Finally it's your own
private drinking fountain and you know it,
cool pillowing lips,
whispers from yesterday's lovemaking,
even the rasp of curses,
tag ends rise up
in continually moist jets
never mind the talk shows, the pseudo
psychobabble battering at its captive
crazed audiences locked in
each evening to high
glitzy commercials, ruthlessly ignorant
cartoons trying to make us buy cars
and politicians we don't need;
put you in solitary
for years it's still there,
in the cramped springhouse asking itself
question after question, serious
thrusts at the universe mixed
with crazy puns, quips
tossing their wild wet hair,
with dim gurgles, jokes
murmuring quietly, confetti colored
video games talking to themselves in neon
even when no one's using them,
energy flashing like water
trickling between roots
for nobody's particular
benefit unless somebody happens
to pay attention to it, but you carry
the whole stream with you!
Awake or asleep it continues

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sometimes miserable, in heavy
doldrums of aching regret,
the lost wife, the husband,
the accident you ran away from, the one name
you keep trying to forget;
even chained to the back of an immense
dying turtle it keeps muttering,
plates of submerged suffering
can't keep it down, it simply
cannot be muffled, little spurts of it
snatches of clothes, body parts, jingles
pop up everywhere, O Quiet!
you want to yell at it but remember
especially when you can't sleep,
in sweaty pajamas twisting
when nobody else is awake
it's still there for you, sweetest
out of the deepest
desert aquifer, numbers
and sheep to count, rhymes
endlessly doing their tricks, in the circus
that won't leave you, in the damp
secret glittering at the center
just listen to it, mumbling
and glimmering away inside there,
keeping itself company
below the flickering, blurred
face of the digital clock,
inside as well as outside,
with the water down to a thin ribbon
all night, in the constant
lonely click of streetlights, the whirr of them
addressing empty streets,
even with no cars on them it keeps going
as long as you do,
no wonder sometimes you think you could drink from it
forever and not stop

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HENRY HART

The Tree Ladder

Once again I shut the back door hard
on uncles quarreling over news
of war erupting in a distant jungle.

From the trash barrel crammed with sawed scraps
in the barn's corner, I gather armfuls
of small boards abandoned by my father.

The windows of the half-built house are flames
lit by the late sun. My mother's hand
rises from the stove like a dove as I pass.

My arms ache with the awkward load
of misshapen boards. My small fist tightens
on rusted nails straightened in the vice.

I climb a hill past hollow apple trees
to the tallest oak
and begin knocking at the bark.

On the last sturdy branch I almost laugh
at the crooked spine I have nailed
according to no plan,

and listen to bells counting the hours
in the church below,
and to my father calling from the glass

door that is no longer fire.
Wind repeats one note through copper buds

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burning on the twigs beneath my hands.

One by one stars nail their ladders
from skeletons on the hills.
I have left the loud house forever.

I climb each star with my eye
poised on invisible rungs.
Beneath the last I falter and know

when I return to the house
where my father saws and says nothing
I will still hear the static news

and taste the small half-moon of blood
I have hammered in the nail of my thumb
and wait for sleep to climb the final rung.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Ancestral Passages

INTO THE MIDDLE OF DANCE'S PERPETUAL DISAPPEARING ACT came two remarkable pieces last fall that not only admitted their histories but built on them. Made from perspectives worlds apart and diametrically different traditions, Twyla Tharp's *Demeter and Persephone* and Sardono W. Kusumo's *Passage through the Gong* were both in a sense about transformation.[1] Both choreographers were reflecting on their roots as a means of living and dancing in the present.

Until Twyla Tharp's company season in September, I didn't have much hope for the piece she was creating on the Martha Graham company. I couldn't see what those two choreographers had in common, although Tharp told me years ago that with Graham's death she felt she'd inherited a responsibility for carrying on the creative tradition of modern dance. When she showed excerpts from the new work, dancing the Demeter role with uproarious spoken program notes, I couldn't see how the Graham dancers would ever be as entertaining. Comedy was never Graham's strong point; she dealt with matters of the utmost gravity, and Tharp's finished piece really wasn't funny, except for some farcical moments. But her extraordinary ability to reflect in public on her own work provided her with an entertaining spin-off, viable for a short time in her own group's repertory.

Demeter is a departure for Tharp, who hasn't specialized in storytelling. The only overtly narrative dances of hers I can think of are the semi-autobiographical *When We Were Very Young* and *The Catherine Wheel,* and a dip into musical comedy, *Everlast,* that nobody liked but me. But then, I've also thought that many if not all of Tharp's works reflected her dancing life in some less-than-literal way, as Graham's mythological metaphors reflected her emotional life. So maybe they would be able to intersect after all.

Demeter and Persephone in Tharp's hands became less a story than a dance. Its dynamism was fired not by tortured emotions but by the rhythms of a klezmer score. The pop-Yiddish idiom of this music somehow bridged all the years between Tharp, postmodernism, and

[1] *Demeter and Persephone*, choreographed by Twyla Tharp, was performed by the Martha Graham company at New York's City Center; *Passage Through the Gong*, choreographed by Sardono W. Kusumo, was performed by the Sardono music and dance ensemble at the Carey Playhouse of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

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Graham and her signifying Greeks. Santo Loquasto's lavish black dresses made the Grahams look like nautch dancers or gypsies out of Denishawn, rather than gaunt fashion plates. The Tharp/klezmer combination propelled them into a new physicality, a sense of moving for the first time, that for years they've shown only when reconstituting the earliest, pre-dramatic Graham dances.

Not that Tharp ignores the story altogether, but it seemed to me she was going for the underlying themes rather than the plotline. Graham never openly choreographed the Demeter legend, but her notebooks return obsessively to the earth-goddess figure whose daughter was seduced and carried away by Hades and later released from the underworld to spend part of the year on earth. The eternal leave-takings and rebirths symbolize the cycle of the seasons, as well as the necessity of hope, love, procreation and death for the continuance of that cycle. The dance of Graham that seems to derive most closely from this myth is *Dark Meadow* (1946), a powerful prologue to the literature of the mature, post-Jungian Graham style. The bonding of two women—whether mother and daughter or a woman and her confidante-guardian—is perhaps as important a theme for Graham as the couplings these women are always agonizing about. In fact, in Graham's dance-drama, the vulnerable but courageous central figure's search is not really for a sexual partner, but for inner truth or strength. The heroine's female familiars are reflections of her self, and thus are absorbing and supportive to her in ways that none of her prospective mates could ever be. Marriage may be necessary, for fulfillment, for begetting children, for other reasons, but it's only a way station along the bigger journeys Graham imagined.

Tharp followed Graham's thought in making Demeter the main character. Graham invariably played the one who struggles with love, who seeks to be transformed by it, and who sometimes pays a fearsome price for it. But she wasn't the ingénue, who, as Persephone, gets carried off in ecstasy and never considers the consequences. Persephone is an instrument. She only brings the spring because her mother makes a pact for her return with Zeus. Tharp told me in a recent interview that she also saw Demeter as representing woman in a later, postmenopausal, stage of life, when concerns with children and other threads that have split off during one's life become "rebundled" and the personality is reunified. Tharp, of course, now just past fifty, has reached that phase in her own life too.

Tharp staged *Demeter and Persephone* as a nonstop suite of dances done by a group of players, a sort of Eleusinian mysteries or a folk play. Graham framed her 1940 passion-play *El Penitente* the same way. Like that piece, *Demeter* presents a series of scenes, glimpses of the characters in midstream so to speak. Persephone (Rika Okamoto) and her mother reach out to each other across the stage space, both of them captured and modeled in the arms of their male partners like archaic deities. They sail close together, then are swept apart again.

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Demeter (Christine Dakin) dances her anger and frustration while a chorus of women led by Terese Capucilli try to imitate her actions. This is something like the process of dancemaking—Graham's especially—where one person's emotive gesture becomes conventionalized into a movement vocabulary. Tharp has borrowed a few gestures from this vocabulary, so unlike her own, but more than that, she has thought about how Graham inscribed personality or character onto movement with stopped, expressive shapes and patterns. She also gained amplitude from the size and sparseness of Graham's gesture; again, quite the opposite of her own preference for small, close-in-to-the-body action.

The two men in *Demeter and Persephone*, Hades the seducer (Floyd Flynn) and Zeus the father of Persephone (Peter London), are relatively unimportant. They're listed, unnamed, among the Attendants in the program. They maneuver the protagonists, lead the processions. They strut around looking good, as if they hadn't had a thought in the world ever. Flynn, especially stud-like, surrounds any available female and gathers her up in gorgeous erotic lifts that recall the male-female choruses in *Dark Meadow*. Choreographically, Tharp has conferred much more integrity on men in the past, flattered them and challenged their skills, but even in these Grahamish hunks, she has managed to find sensuality.

Tharp is every bit as shrewd as Graham was about the subplots and shadow themes that are present in any dance. On one level her Demeter dance is about a mother's pain and the re-enactment of perpetual loss/restoration/loss as the Eleusinian mysteries. But it may also be about the family of dancers founded by Graham, or before her, by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. One branch of that family leads, however improbably, to Tharp herself through Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham. And will go on from there to Tharp's progeny. Dancing, re-configured each generation, makes possible the conversion of pain into celebration. It is the mystery through which the dance family stays connected. And with this piece, Tharp affirms her place in the family line.

In Sardono W. Kusumo's meditative theater-piece, *Passage Through the Gong*, Indonesian cultural practice seemed to heal the wounds of modernism. Through an astonishing series of images, Sardono showed us traditional Javanese culture, its symbols renewed through the centuries and still potent today. The choreographer appears at the beginning in meditation, bringing the past to life. As he expels his breath, he slowly begins to merge psychically with natural forces, growing stronger, his voice changing from a chanted OM to the guttural shouts of a warrior, the snarls of a ferocious animal. He seems to be invoking spirits. A shadowy procession emerges in the background, mysterious figures carrying a two-tiered umbrella and statues of an elephant, a peacock, a tree.

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Like ghosts or memories, four female dancers glide in, strange and exotic in their sarongs, sashes, jeweled hair ornaments. These apparitions perform a ritual dance, Srimpi Sangupati, composed in the eighteenth century by the Sultan of Surakarta but based on a much older court form. Srimpi, one of the two most important classical forms of central Java (the other is bedoyo), is performed by members of the royal court, and represents ancient stories of Islamic and pre-Islamic times. It's led by a real princess, Koes Murtiyah, who directed the version seen in Sardono's work. Srimpi is so conventionalized that most of the narrative is submerged in the continuous, slow, revolving movements accented by the women's curling fingers as they flick back the ends of their sashes. A gamelan plays softly, but the melodious muffled gongs are punctuated by disturbing shouts from the musicians and the female singer. The dancers, after shifting gradually into new floor patterns, drift to the center of their square, where a table has been set with goblets and a decanter of wine. With a continuous looping gesture, one of the dancers pours out wine and offers it to another. They sip, glancing sidelong at each other, replace the glasses, glide into another set of formations.

Suddenly—but their movements aren't sudden, you just notice it suddenly because everything seems merged with everything else—they've taken large revolvers from within the folds of their costumes. Just the sight of these clumsy modern weapons in the hands of these ultra-refined maidens is a violation. They aim at the dancer opposite them, and in a terrible moment of directness, fire one loud shot, holding the guns at arm's length and pulling away with their upper bodies. They replace the guns in their sarongs, slowly spin into new positions and sit meditatively on the floor. This simulated attack used to be done with the traditional Indonesian zigzag dagger, or kris, and the guns were adopted from the Dutch during the colonial period. The buried story of the dance, a fight between two female warriors, becomes a comment on the bogus civilities of the court under foreign rulers. Srimpi also teaches a lesson in self-control, in a culture where the passions ideally are kept in balance through sublimating rituals and art.

The dancers somehow disappear as another scene unfolds. Masked figures dressed in grey Western clothes of perhaps the nineteenth century—military uniforms, Victorian dresses—pour wine from the decanter and are soon clinking glasses and reeling tipsily, making pompous speeches and animal cries. One of the figures begins shedding her clothes, like a snake molting, wriggling out of the stiff grey garments. Then the whole party sinks into an orgy, the men's clothes falling off to reveal loincloths. The dancers weave back again with their guns, this time sliding across the footlights. Their sacred square and their inner concentration broken, they now gaze outward intently, and at unexpected intervals they fire into the audience.

Meanwhile another procession has entered, carrying a woman (Eko

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Kadarsih) on a platform. The erstwhile drinking companions, now primitives, begin a foursquare dance, very reminiscent of the Srimpi dance, that over a long time builds up to a trance-like frenzy. Meanwhile the woman on the platform, very slowly revolving in place, sheds layer after layer of exquisite silk, without seeming to touch it, and the silk piles up below her as it's discarded. She could be doing the Srimpi movements underneath, or an elegant striptease, and later, when she's down to the last sarong, it's a shock to see her exposed leg. She squats deeper, angles her arms and body, and begins to look like the erotic carvings on central Java's thousand-year-old temples—those very shapes that the classical dance re-inscribes so much more decorously.

This dance on the platform entices a giant who has been sitting with his back to the audience all the while, playing a set of hanging gongs. He climbs up to the dancer's platform and with maniacal laughter prepares to carry her off. But he's interrupted by Sardono, who scampers on with fierce yells and roars, in the role of Hanuman, the Ramayana's benevolent white monkey. He fights the giant and rescues the girl, leaving behind his weapon. The giant seizes this long pole and consoles himself with it, first using it as a huge penis and masturbating, then wielding it to hit some big gongs that are hanging above the platform.

Now the whole stage pulsates with a wonderful gong music (the score for the whole piece was by Rahayu Supanggah), and the dancers gyrate into trance-like whirling. The statues are carried in again, but this time instead of their original dull color, they're transformed into gold—this must have been a trick of Clifton Taylor's magical lighting. Slowly all the players leave except Sardono, who sinks back into meditation as the lights go out.

I thought this piece was enthralling, from beginning to end. The visual pleasure of these beautiful images dissolving and re-emerging, the dreamlike sound of the gamelan, the calm dignity of the rarely seen Srimpi, would have been feast enough. But Sardono made these images speak, even to a Western audience, of passion and control, of nature and civilization, of the power of ritual to keep these forces not in suppression but healthily in play. His work had more than an engrossing theatricality. It showed us how traditional culture can be regenerated, and how it keeps its spirituality. It even suggests what we've long forgotten, that art can make a difference in our lives.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Representative Men

THE NOTION OF ANY ONE PERSON "DEFINING" or "embodying" an age is a debatable one. Twenty years ago Hugh Kenner wrote a breathtaking study of Ezra Pound and his influence, but I'm still not sure I think of the artistic world of the early twentieth century as *The Pound Era*. Nor would the idea of Victorian England as "The Age of Dickens" sit right; for that matter, even the eponymous term *Victorian* itself has little to do with the dowdy resident of Sandringham Castle. Yet somehow the title of the large autumn exhibition at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—"The Age of Rubens"—seems reasonably applicable. Such a vast claim has to do with Rubens the artist as well as Rubens the citizen, with Church politics and a nervous, almost manic post-Renaissance energy.

After the recent exhibitions in the United States and Europe of Titian, Rembrandt, Velásquez, and other Old Masters, Rubens is a hard sell to the modern eye. A bravura technique is evident in everything he put his hand to, but the oppressive robustness of his figures and the worship of size and power his canvases suggest are apt to be a specialized taste in this day and age. Given that perception, the situating of Rubens in the context of his region and his era makes sense. So what we saw at the Museum of Fine Arts was an equal number of works by Rubens' pupils, collaborators, and contemporaries, making this attractive show the first international loan exhibition in America that provided a full-scale survey of seventeenth-century Flemish art. That Rubens remains the big name in this creative tapestry is never in question, and the placing of a formidable scene like the Philadelphia Museum's *Prometheus Bound* (1611) in the first gallery is designed to proclaim that no one else of his age would have been capable of producing as terrifying and theatrical a painting. The contortions of the naked hero, the viciousness of the liver-devouring eagle, even the rocks and the tree and the sky and the clothes beneath Prometheus cry out that this is an artist with skill and energy to burn, a draftsman and a colorist of daunting dexterity. As the catalogue text appropriately emphasizes, Rubens was the man the Catholic monarchs and Church fathers were looking for to reinvest the faith with the glamor and sense of inevitability it needed to contain the damage done by the Reformation. Despite the omissions of the works that obviously couldn't leave Europe, there was enough on view in Boston to give one a feel for the propagandizing power of Rubens' nativities

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and religious personages. Add to this résumé Rubens' important work in government, as a diplomat, and you do have a colossus bestriding his age, a figure that probably left many of his peers feeling rather marginal.

Yet, easy as it was in this show to see how Peter Paul Rubens towers over Jacob Jordaens or Abraham Janssens or Cornelius de Vos, there was still that stumbling block of how we in the late twentieth century respond to the fact that almost everyone in these canvases, large or small, is of ridiculously athletic proportions. The hyper-masculine build of a god like Mars is one thing, but that Rubens' love of implausible forearms extends even to the portrait of a charismatic Dominican friar, like *Michiel Ophovious* (1615), is hard to take. If one is pondering an artist in a serious way, appreciation of his technique and historical importance can't be the beginning and the end of it. There is an outright disdain for delicacy in the paintings that rankles, no matter how accepting we are of the crucial background of Rubens' service to the Counter-Reformation. As an interesting consequence, we were as apt to be drawn in this exhibition to a corner of Jan Boeckhorst's *The Adoration of the Magi* (1652) simply for the folds of Mary's gown and the placid, tawny head of the cow behind her as to anything more robust and majestic. Indeed, the attraction after a while is to all of those figures that *don't* look crushingly muscular—to the beautiful, sagging old man's flesh in Anthony Van Dyck's *Saint Jerome* (1618), to the feminine grace of his *James Stuart* (1633), or to the gentleness of his oil sketch of the children of Charles I. The more humane busyness of Breughel's monumental bleaching fields, in which hundreds of peasants engage in a spring ritual of airing and cleaning their sheets, comes to seem closer to heaven than any number of virile saints and clerics ready to subdue the transgressors.

In that sense, "The Age of Rubens" made an inadvertent but intriguing point: those artists who best represent their age are not likely to be those who speak to that which is common to all ages, to the eternal human need (exemplified, say, by Titian, Vermeer, Chardin, or Bonnard) for the calm, the stately, the contemplative, and the *unhysterically* sensual.

Now, in our own time would anyone quibble with the rubric "The Age of Freud"? Not as a title relevant to the later, debunking years of the century, but to the period 1910-1960 that saw Western society readjusting its self-image and the *process* by which a self-image is determined and the language it is couched in. That the British painter Lucian Freud, now in his early seventies, should be the grandson of Sigmund, who played so seminal a role in articulating the new, darker, more labyrinthine conception of man, is almost too perfect to be true: here we have a genealogy out of Central Casting. For Lucian Freud is a similarly probing, pessimistic, evocative artist who places great stress on sexual taboos, the body, the unconscious, the reality of

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a godless world in which we have only ourselves, our analytic honesty, and our self-awareness to get us through. The difference in reputation between grandfather and grandson is the difference time makes: the founder of psychoanalysis was received as a Promethean rebel and genius. Lucian Freud has been ignored for a long time as too conservative a craftsman and now will be lionized as a neglected giant of the fin-de-siècle, the great painter of the twilight of—among other things—the century of Freud.

Spending time with the ninety-odd works, mainly paintings (some quite small and others larger than life-size), at the Metropolitan Museum's Freud exhibition makes it hard to resist superlatives. The impact of this review of his recent work is even more powerful than the one at the Hirshhorn several years ago, a show that did much to suggest that Freud had been unfairly ignored in the rush to push all figurative painting to the sidelines of modern culture. But, then, it could be argued that this is not figurative painting in any commonly perceived sense of the term; we are, perhaps, closer to the horrific landscape of Francis Bacon and the weirdness of Stanley Spencer than to any reassuring academic tradition. We aren't looking at his often affectless figures to learn something about their personality or psychology or place in life. Beckett-like, it's all one and the same. The group portraits might as well be individual portraits pasted together for all of the bonding or intimacy that is taking place. And Freud's London interiors have the same scrupulous exactitude and unnerving tension to them, much like the nudes or the views from his Holland Park window. The significant development in style that this exhibition documents is Freud's newfound fascination with crusts of paint, a thicker, grittier application of a material he has always handled like a master. Letting himself go with the brush but continuing to restrict his palette to the same muted grays, browns, yellows, and whites, he achieves a stunning level of technical competence. That said, we are left to make sense of *what* Freud paints and his enigmatic attitude toward his subjects.

One of the qualities I like best about Lucian Freud's art is the way in which it ignores many of the received opinions of our time, as if this artist weren't even aware of the rest of the art world. Portraiture is allegedly a dead-and-buried form of expression. No one is supposed to be painting the nude any more. Even too self-consciously "complete" or detailed a representational painting is a retrograde act; hence, the dribbles of paint in an Eric Fischl or a Joseph Santore. But Freud does paint faces and naked bodies and very complete interiors, down to the last stripe of the floppy old mattress and the rumpled sheets on the rugless floor. But he mines this territory with a vague sense of loss and discomfort and an equally potent sense of the magic of paint. All of his nudes, which made up the better part of what was arresting at the Metropolitan, steer clear of any impulse that is celebratory or truly erotic. Three hundred years of bathers, nymphs,

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and odalisques have definitively come to an end. Freud further distances himself from that tradition by painting the male nude as frequently as the female, subjecting men to the same uncompromising examination (in some cases with their legs spread as well) that women have known for centuries. What results is genuinely provocative—a high-caliber assault. For one thing, not since Robert Mapplethorpe have we had so many ponderous penises on a museum wall. Big fleshy things, no discretion involved, impossible to ignore, they have about as much sexual allure as the stark white breasts and splayed legs of his women—everyone, unclothed, in these paintings is an object of obsessive study (ours as well as the artist's), a kind of somber beauty, rather than a focus of heated curiosity or desire. One odd result of this arrangement is to make us feel absurdly nostalgic for an earlier time and relentlessly conscious of the naiveté we have lost. I think that is what Freud is after. The little bit of multi-colored taffeta that covers the lower half of one naked male in the last gallery or the flamboyant patterned material that covers a woman's lap in *Evening in the Studio* (1993): these are the only vestiges of the rich, sexy, decorative accoutrements that have always accompanied paintings of a nude figure, a shapely woman, from Titian through Matisse. They are, rightly so, woefully inappropriate to any treatment of physicality and sexuality today. In a time of sexual illness, the hairless skull of Leigh Bowery (the subject of some of Freud's biggest pictures) has more pertinence. In an age of video sex and anxiety about contact with other bodies, our neutered staring at these people is more applicable to a world of nervous, secondhand experience.

This needn't be seen as all that grim, though. What we have, what we are left with, in Lucian Freud is the body itself, drained of any mystique, stripped of romance and erotic charm, as an object to contemplate equivalent to any still-life subject or interesting view of the backyard. Sex-as-passion or sex-as-domination has become a preoccupation run to ground, and it is only in painting the unclothed body—or, in other contexts, talking, thinking, or writing about it—that any residual meaning or impact is to be found. D.H. Lawrence's fear of "sex in the head" replacing "blood knowledge" has come to pass. Even the monumental portrait of Leigh Bowery (a man over six feet tall and well over two hundred pounds), bald, stark naked with one leg over the arm of a chair, is shocking only for the first few minutes. Then it simply seems implacably honest and unsentimental. (One picture of Bowery, the only one in the entire exhibition of which this was true, seemed stagey and therefore false to me: Bowery lies naked on the floor with one leg up on the bed, resting his head archly against a pile of sheets on the floor.) This is not a small accomplishment. In knowing ourselves, we inch closer to acceptance or to change—whichever we can manage. And in painting so confidently and skillfully, Freud testifies to that which is hardest of all to degrade: the power of real art.

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Jacob Kainen is a name well-known to anyone in the American art world and probably quite unknown to the average museum- or gallery-goer, at least outside of Washington, D.C. This is because he has, in his eighty-four productive years, tilled large fields on both sides of the fence, something most people have neither the energy nor the inclination to do. He has been an intelligent and respected painter and printmaker whose first one-man show was held at the ACA Gallery in New York in 1940—the starting-point of a long exhibition history—and he has been a valued curator and scholar at the Smithsonian since 1942. Not until his retirement in 1970 (at the age of sixty-one) did he devote himself full-time to his art and not until this year was he the subject of a sizable major-museum retrospective of his oil paintings. The attention is overdue.

Kainen's story is an interesting one, as art historian Avis Berman's biographical essay "Images from a Life" in the National Museum of American Art catalogue makes clear. Born to a Russian immigrant family in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1909, he was as a young man a passionate art student—learned beyond his years—at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, the school from which he was expelled in 1930 for his refusal to adhere strictly enough to Pratt's commercial-oriented, conservative, anti-Modernist program. He was more successful on his own, anyway. In his early twenties he became friendly with Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky, John Graham and George Ault, joined the John Reed Club, wrote his first art criticism, succumbed (most productively) to "the lure of Expressionism" and social activism, and enjoyed a Greenwich Village life of great intellectual if not economic nourishment. All signs pointed toward a rich career as a future member of the then-emergent New York School. Kainen's life took an unexpected turn in the early forties, though. The need to support himself and his new wife led him to Washington, D.C. and a temporary position at the Smithsonian. That temporary job became a permanent one by the time the war ended and, with children to take care of then, a return to bohemian New York was out of the question. Though he was subjected to unconscionable harassment during the McCarthy period for his Depression-era ties to the left, Kainen eventually became a crucial guiding force at the museum's Division of Graphic Arts. Over the course of the ensuing three decades, he was a major curatorial presence in the capital, promoting the work of countless painters and printmakers, and a prominent scholar of all phases of American art. But, of course, the *need* to paint, when deeply felt in adolescence, never dies and throughout his adult life Kainen has refused the absolutes of "the road not taken" idea. Somehow, he has managed to function as an artist as well.

The one hundred paintings on view at the National Museum of American Art last fall made for a kind of history-in-miniature of this century's aesthetic concerns. The pictures of the 1930s are renderings of street scenes, tenement fires, hot-dog vendors, midtown cafeterias,

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and corner barbershops—the stuff of urban social realism—but with an important difference from what people like Raphael Soyer or Isabel Bishop were doing. The forms and figures are not plausibly "realistic" and the colors and application of paint are more in spirit with the stridency or energy of Kirchner, Beckmann, and the other German Expressionists Kainen had come to know through his browsing in the avant-garde galleries of Manhattan. This is a representational art, done by a man not yet thirty, that is making itself ready to break with representation, that expresses its own subtle built-in doubts about representation. The paintings of the 1940s and 1950s continue, sometimes tentatively and sometimes robustly, that process, feeling their way toward abstraction. Some of the best, like *Emerge and Shine* (1955), *Only in Darkness* (1955), and *The Vulnerable* (1954), could well take their place in any survey of the period's best accomplishments in that vein—with Baziotes, Gottlieb, and Kline. Oddly, in the 1960s, Kainen seems to have lost faith with the potential of pure abstraction to convey the emotional impact he had always sought; the quasi-figurative works of those years, largely bright paint-swabbed portraits, have a capable but undistinguished, unadventurous feel to them. They aren't really in the exuberant or self-confident spirit of David Park or Elmer Bischoff, the California "return to the figure" artists who probably inspired this detour. However, the break that came with his early retirement from the Smithsonian also meant, not surprisingly, Kainen's return to an exploration, in series form, of vivid soft-edged color abstraction. Some of these paintings succeed, some don't. What matters is an authenticity of expression, a belief in the continued viability of luminous fields of color, of harmonies of elemental shapes (most often rectangles), of what the hand can do and the gestures and marks it leaves behind. Kainen's is a body of work that reminds us that every choice doesn't necessarily preclude all others, that what counts—along with talent—is the extent of our interest and our energy.

Other stops for this exhibition after Washington, D.C. are the Addison Gallery in Andover, Massachusetts in the spring and the Equitable Gallery in New York City in the summer.

In brief: Seeing the Pop Artist Roy Lichtenstein's retrospective at the Guggenheim this winter gave one a feeling of what it must have been like wandering the corridors of those massive turn-of-the-century "official" Salon exhibitions of the kind the National Academy of Design used to hold in New York. What stunning vacuity. What numbing technical perfection. And so much of it! You're put in a no-win situation, too, of course. Had you said to the stodgy Academicians of the 1890s, "But it's all so passionless," you would have been told, "A work of art aspires to refinement, harmony, morality, elegance. Why make too much of passion?" In the 1990s, we might want to cry out, "But it's all so empty, so glib!" The answer you are

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going to get, terminating any discussion, is: "And that's the point." Suffice it to say, I think we should stand by two principles. If it looks as sporty in reproduction as "in the flesh," it shouldn't claim too much of our time or thought. Secondly, there is a limit to how much parody anyone should be expected to find meaningful. In small doses, it deflates pretension. By the truckload, it exhausts and depresses.

A winter exhibition that wasn't exhausting or depressing was the Joan Miró retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, celebrating the centenary of the Catalan painter's birth. After the well-intentioned muddle of the Latin-American survey show and the ineffable dreariness of Robert Ryman's voyage into the wading pool of Minimalism, MoMA returned to a worthier focus. There are genuine satisfactions involved in becoming reacquainted with the early quasi-Cubist portraits and figure studies, like the spectacular *Standing Nude* (1911) from the St. Louis Museum, the Imaginary landscapes of the 1920s, the "tableaux sauvages," the Constellation series, and the simplicity and expansiveness of the late paintings. "To reveal the marvelous in the quotidian," as a catalogue essay describes Miró's ultimate goal, is a lofty pursuit, not as whimsical a business as it seems. Yet, when all is said and done, except for the student or the newcomer to the world of modern art, for whom was this show revelatory or deeply instructive? The 1986 Guggenheim Miró retrospective was not so very long ago, nor are we in as serious need of a revaluation as might have been the case at the time of the 1972 Guggenheim show. In fact, the whole thing felt like an awfully nice birthday party. But the danger that MoMA is locked into replays of its own canon-making, like the old college prof whose yellowing notes on Joyce and Eliot give the impression that there the story ends, is real and a bit worrisome. For this once-electrifying institution, we don't get enough exhibition ideas anymore like "Vienna 1900" or "High & Low." The fact that the former show worked wonderfully and the latter did not is beside the point; MoMA's staff was breaking with the textbook "line" to explore under-known talents, pressing issues, interesting connections. To watch the Modern become in the next century a cultural warhorse like the Metropolitan Opera or the Philharmonic would be a sad development, but so The signs portend.

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BERT CARDULLO

Men at Work

As has been my habit in the past, I choose to concentrate in this column on two films that are related not only by subject and tradition, but also by exposure—which is to say very little outside such cities as New York and Los Angeles. I hope thereby to call them to the attention of the diminishing number of "art houses" and film societies, not to speak of videotape distributors, throughout the country, if not for these films' quality then for the instructiveness of their flaws. What you will not find in these pages is yet another review of the sluggish *Age of Innocence* or the soupy *Short Cuts,* each made by a director whose best work is behind him, and each adapted from fiction that resists transference to the screen. So much so in the case of Edith Wharton's novel that Martin Scorsese felt obliged to use considerable prose excerpts on the soundtrack, droned by Joanne Woodward. Wharton's witty and perspicacious narration is her fiction's reason for being, not its slender tale of love versus honor set in New York high society of the 1870s; and that double-edged narration, that blend of sympathy and satire, is largely missing from the film—despite Woodward's voice-over—which takes itself far too seriously, as if it were, impossibly, a nineteenth-century American version of a seventeenth-century French or Spanish tragic romance.

As for *Short Cuts,* which Robert Altman adapted from nine of Raymond Carver's stories and one of his poems, the problem is not one of narration but of inflection. Altman tries to blow up the smallness (in the best sense of that word) of Carver's short fiction into the consequence of something resembling the Great American Novel—that is, he tells ten stories involving twenty-three characters in intermingled form, replete with artificial, portentous connective devices and narrative embellishment as well as a change of setting from the Pacific Northwest to Los Angeles—and the predictable result is not an extension but a diminution of the Carveresque epiphany. Edith Wharton elegantly chronicled in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) the strict aristocratic manners of a bygone age, an "innocent" age in the sense that it still had some semblance of social coherence and authority; Raymond Carver compassionately told in such stories as "So Much Water Close to Home" (1977) and "A Small, Good Thing" (1983) of the struggle of ordinary twentieth-century Americans to make sense of their rudderless lives in what could be called the age of lawless- or amorphousness. Neither author paid much attention to

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workers—certainly not Wharton, and Carver never to the worker-as-worker, as someone whose work forms the immutable and exclusive basis of his identity. In the twentieth century, this is an area of British, not American, specialty, for reasons that shall become clear.

The working class has been a major subject of British art since the mid-1950s, when novelists such as John Braine and Alan Sillitoe, together with dramatists like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, began treating anti-Establishment themes in a style that can be accurately characterized as "social realism." Soon social realism crossed over into film, where it became known as "New Cinema," a movement whose ethos or social commitment was borrowed from Italian neorealism, whose techniques were modeled upon those of the French New Wave, and whose scripts were often adaptations of plays and novels by blue-collar writers. Social-realist art in Britain was the product of the "Angry Young Men"—angry at a society that had educated them above their class origins yet had inevitably failed to provide sufficient opportunities for them in so small a country as England; and angry at a government that had improved the living and working conditions of the proletariat but had done nothing to remove class barriers, had in fact locked those barriers more firmly in place by giving the workers what they wanted, to a point.

The United States produced its own class of angry young men during the 1930s, led by Clifford Odets and represented by the workers' theatre movement, but American anger at the plight of the underclass (as opposed to the exclusively black underclass) has largely disappeared from art, primarily because, after World War II, our blue-collar workers became *de facto* members of the middle class as wages and standards of living rose; even those workers who haven't benefited materially tend to identify with those who have. And our films reflect this state of affairs: with the possible exception of an occasional fiction film like *Matewan* (1987) and the documentaries of Barbara Kopple, American workers tend to be featured in heroic, solidarity-promoting plots that will culminate in their common betterment (for example, Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* [1954]), or they find themselves successfully struggling to become their own boss, to run their own business and thus shed the title of mere "worker," in such films as *An American Romance* (1944) and the recent *Mac*.

British workers, by contrast, continue to be the subject of unsentimental, unglorified tales that depict their hostility toward the ruling-class Establishment, their disillusionment with the Welfare State, and often their own narrow-minded, cynical resistance to change, which is as much the result of a misplaced pride as it is of a moral poverty bred of isolation, hopelessness, and improvidence. These workers persist in being the subject of narrative, dramatic, and cinematic art for two simple reasons: a blooded working class continues to subsist in England and, like the blooded aristocracy in that country, it tenaciously defines itself by accent, occupation, and attitude; and British

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artists' anger at the plight of the underclass—an anger that first expressed itself in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century under the banner of naturalism—has not subsided. Among *film* artists who are centrally interested in the working class, three men stand out: Mike Leigh, Terence Davies, and Ken Loach.

Loach (born 1936) has been making socially conscious films, for television in addition to the big screen, since 1964. His first feature as well as first film to be shown in the United States was *Poor Cow* (1967), which examined the sexual mores of the urban poor. Loach followed *Poor Cow* with *Kes* (1969), which remains his biggest financial success and the best of his eight or nine features. *Kes* is his best film because it eschews the political tendentiousness, if not downright socialist propaganda, of Loach at his worst, as in *Family Life* (1971) and *Hidden Agenda* (1990); because it strikingly juxtaposes a West Midland boy's tender training of a kestrel hawk against the oppressive circumstances in which he is forced to grow up; and in the end because its tragicomedy helps *Kes* to render the world complexly, even infinitely, and thereby to avoid preachiness. This film was made, not by the Ken Loach whose view of history "is that it is a class struggle," but by the Loach who has said, "All I hope, when people see my films, is that they say, 'Yes, that's how things are.' And if that's how things are, then shouldn't we try to change it? If that means I'm a political filmmaker, then so be it."[1] The artist in Ken Loach resists the politicization of his work, then, while the activist in him views art as a means to a political end. The one can laugh as well as cry along with his characters, while the other shuns humor as an opiate that keeps people from the real work of revolution.

Which Loach is at work in his latest film, *Riff-Raff*? The artist, although the movie is marred, unlike the superior *Kes*, by its attempt to inject romance into its chronicle of workers' lives during the Thatcher era. The workers in this case are non-union men—whites from Liverpool, Bristol, and Dublin, blacks from Nigeria, Cameroon, and Jamaica—who are helping to turn the old Princess of Wales Hospital in London into a block of luxury flats. As *Riff-Raff* begins, this construction crew is joined by a skinny, reticent young Glaswegian who has recently been released from prison for thieving and goes under the assumed name of Stevie. Since this is a non-union job, and jobs in general are scarce, safety conditions at the site are none too good, and they are matched by the men's living conditions: they all "squat" in abandoned apartment buildings. But *Riff-Raff* is not so much a call for the laborers to unionize—the loudmouthed Liverpudlian named Larry, simultaneously the funniest and the most political of the group, is quickly fired after his one attempt to organize the men, and that's the last we hear of worker dissatisfaction. Instead,

[1] Loach quoted, in both instances, by Derek Malcolm, "Straight Out of Britain, Tales of Working-Class Life," *The New York Times*, 31 January 1993, Section H, p. 20, col. 3.

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Loach's film is mostly an account of the camaraderie of the workplace and the anarchic or subversive humor that workers use both to lash out at a hostile world and insulate themselves from it.

Accordingly, the camera stays close to the men much of the time and is frequently handheld, which means that it is behaving more as their sprightly companion than their staid observer. Loach doesn't edit the scenes at the worksite with prolonged takes designed to extract our sympathy as well as our scrutiny. Rather, he regularly, almost nervously, cuts from one character to another, which neatly allows him to create a brisk cinematic style at the same time that he suggests fragmentation or division among the workers. Professionally united they are not and do not become in the course of *Riff-Raff*; isolated riff-raff they remain. The ambivalence of the manner in which Loach shoots his laborers is duplicated by the tension that exists between Stewart Copeland's jaunty piano music, which comes close to animating the action instead of simply accompanying it, and Barry Ackroyd's dreary color cinematography, which nearly drains the life from *Riff-Raff*'s motley construction crew.

The film's problems begin, not with its first, symbolic shot of rats scurrying amid rubble, as several critics have maintained, but with the introduction of Susan, a young Belfast woman who foolishly aspires to a singing career. She becomes Stevie's lover and moves in with him, but the relationship founders over her return to drug use, which just happens to occur at the same time as the death of his mother and the recovery of his brother from heroin addiction (Stevie goes home briefly for the funeral), and which is facilitated by the very teenaged delinquents with whom Stevie has had several violent confrontations in or around his apartment building. If you're wondering what all of this has to do with the joys and hazards of the working life, you're not alone. I'm not arguing that this romantic-familial strand couldn't be integrated into the film; I'm saying that it hasn't been, that there's no fruitful connection between it and the strand whose focus is the daily drift of workers' lives.

The discrepancy between *Riff-Raff*'s two narrative strands is apparent even, or I should say first, in the visual style adopted for each. For the scenes with Susan, as opposed to those with the workers, the camera is somewhat removed, there is less cutting and even an occasional long take, and the acting of Robert Carlyle and Emer McCourt, professionals both, lacks the spontaneity, the improvisatory feel, achieved by the mix of pros and amateurs in the scenes at the construction site.[2] There we see workers drift in and out of shots as

[2] Almost since the start of his career, Loach has shared with Italian neorealism—and Soviet silent cinema—a predilection for using nonprofessional actors. A number of the men playing construction workers in *Riff-Raff* were construction workers in real life; and those actors on the building crew (including supervisors) who were professional were required to have construction experience. The screenplay was written by Bill

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the mood grabs them, we pick up, or lose, voices in mid-sentence, and we read subtitles in order to understand the English that is being hastily spoken in several regional accents. Unfortunately, during both narrative strands Loach's camera indulges in counterproductive sentiment, comedic overkill, or political italicizing.

As for the symbolic shot of rats that begins *Riff-Raff,* directly followed by a shot of the workers, I must say that the trite—and immediate—equation of the men with rodents caused me to wince. Here was a movie that was shamelessly announcing from the start its intention to portray the worker, in a reprise of the worst strain from Continental naturalism, as hapless, unthinking victim! But Loach is toying with his audience's experience and expectations, for during the film the men wantonly and gleefully kill these same rats upon discovering their nest in the employees' locker-cum-lunch room. And at the very end, the rats appear again as they are incinerated in the fire that engulfs the nearly completed block of luxury apartments, a fire that has been set by Stevie and his mate Mo in revenge for the serious injury (and perhaps death) of a worker who fell from inadequately secured scaffolding. So Loach's point, it seems to me, is not simply that the men are rodent-like laborers who are being exploited by the brutish captains of industry, but that in addition they conspire in their own exploitation; they are in actuality killing themselves—destroying their means of livelihood—by sabotaging the building site as an act of vengeance against the bosses. Arson is the inevitable culmination or summation of their daily, often petty attempts, through sloth, irresponsibility, or wastefulness, to subvert the capitalistic system that devalues them even as it sustains them. And their subversion is not limited to the company that hired them: they sometimes cheat each other, and the reformed thieves among them—Stevie included—return to thieving as the easiest way to supplement their meager incomes.

Perhaps unionizing is the answer to the workers' plight. But Loach shows, by not emphasizing such a thesis, that he has lingering doubts about the effectiveness of unions in an industrial world that consistently co-opts union leadership—a subject he first brought up in the television films *Rank and File* (1971) and *A Question of Leadership* (1981). No real leader emerges in *Riff-Raff,* but without him, paradoxically, without one strong man who stands apart from the crowd at the same time that he is a part of it, the men remain disunited, disgruntled, and disdained. Their anarchic humor bonds them, in a sense, but it also leads to anarchic behavior, to self-defeating as well as malicious mischief. Thus they are neither completely tragic nor completely comic, neither fully self-aware nor sufficiently obtuse, not totally isolated on the one hand or wholly integrated on the other.

Jesse, himself a former construction worker who died at the age of forty-eight while the film was in post-production; *Riff-Raff* is dedicated to him.

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Which is where we leave them, poignantly in between: the last time we see workers—the wiry Stevie and the weighty Mo—they are laughing lustily as they flee the apartment complex they have just torched.

Riff-Raff shares several plot devices or character depictions with *Mac,* John Turturro's first movie as a director, but its different use of them points up the fundamental difference between these two workers' films. Like Niccolo "Mac" Vitelli (based on Turturro's father, who died in 1988, and played by Turturro himself), Stevie aspires to run his own business, to open a market stall selling "boxer shorts and colored socks"; unlike Mac, who goes from serving as somebody else's carpenter to being his own homebuilder, Stevie doesn't even come close to achieving his dream. On the job, Stevie answers to bosses and foremen, all of whom are bastards or blowhards but none of whom engages in a direct confrontation with him, nor he with them; by contrast, Mac almost immediately runs afoul of his boss, a crass Polish-born contractor, over the issue of workmanship, decides to go into business for himself, and later even gets into a fistfight with his former employer. Both films feature black laborers, and in each it's the black man who meets with a fatal or nearly fatal accident at the construction site. But in *Riff-Raff* the fall of Desmonde, a British-born black who naïvely yearns to emigrate to Africa, is the fault of management, which refuses to spend more money on the men's safety, whereas in *Mac* the fall of Nat, a noble black who is absolutely loyal to bossman Mac, is the result of the carelessness bordering on irresponsibility of the boss's brother Vico. In other words, Desmonde's fall is political and Nat's personal, just as the titles of their respective films are: *Riff-Raff,* about a segment of society, transient laborers, regarded as worthless or disreputable, be they black or white;[3] and *Mac,* about an Italian-American carpenter's achievement of the American dream.

Mac emerges from the crowd to become a leader, but of the domestic or pedestrian variety as opposed to the heroic or even metaphysical one. He leads his own company more than he does other men, and his ultimate responsibility is to his family rather than to organized labor, to the struggle to secure its middle-class prosperity rather than to the proletarian struggle. Indeed, once he becomes an independent builder, his workers threaten to complain to their union if he doesn't relax his unusually high construction standards. Mac, you understand, is a perfectionist, a master craftsman with a monstrous temper, and he sees his kind of loving labor fast disappearing from the building trade in the ready-made or prefabricated society of postwar America. Mac builds homes instead of merely overseeing their building, then sells them himself, which means that he gets to

[3] Unfortunately, *Riff-Raff* doesn't allow us to draw this conclusion for ourselves. One of the Africans draws it for us when he declares that "these foremen treat all the workers like blacks on this fucking site."

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meet if not pick the buyers. At others' behest Stevie and cohorts erect high-rises whose occupants they never encounter, whose sleek comforts they will never know, and the quality of whose workmanship is less important than its speed combined with its economy.

Mac is different from *Riff-Raff*, then, but it's also the lesser work, for several reasons. First, as an autobiographical film, a memorial to John Turturro's father, Nicholas R. "Mac" Turturro, it makes the mistake of assuming that remembered truth is artistic truth, that emotion reflected in bathos is the same as emotion reflected in tranquility. Related to this, the movie is guilty of aesthetic solipsism, of not connecting, except by the faintest implication or the crudest confrontation, Mac's working experience and professional ambition with those of other Italian-Americans—better yet, with those of other immigrant families—during the 1950s. *Mac* is little more than Turturro's homage to his father not only for having carved out a piece of the American pie for himself, and carved it out on his own terms, but also for having produced a son, John, who's a chip off the old block: a performer so dedicated to *his* craft that he would spend thirteen years writing, rewriting, rehearsing, and finally directing a film that deifies the art of acting at the same time that it enshrines his father. Except that here the art of acting, because of the excessive attention lavished on it by its practitioners, becomes the knack for self-display, even a labor of self-love. Its realism becomes so heightened as to be histrionic: emoting for its own sake or for the sake of the actors, who get to show off their physical and vocal skills all the while they are fingering their psyches.

There's not much story to *Mac* because it really has only one character, and its mosaic of scenes is designed more as a series of acting exercises than as an experiment in, or expansion of, narrative filmmaking. Confusingly, the movie begins with the funeral of Mac's Italian-born *father*, who was just as devoted to the carpenter's craft as his oldest son but never rose to the level of running his own construction firm in his adopted homeland. Mac learned his perfectionism, his meticulous attention to detail, from Papa Vitelli, and the film trumpets the fact that he was the only one of three sons to inherit his father's mantle. Vico (Michael Badalucco) is a well-intentioned but lazy, beery, would-be ladies' man, whereas the youngest brother, Bruno (Carl Capotorto), is the family's first college graduate, an aspiring painter, and something of a lady-killer. Both Vico and Bruno invest in, and work for, brother Mac's building company, but the former is just putting in his time while the latter makes ends meet as he concentrates on the loftier career-goal of becoming an artist as opposed to a mere artisan. The three sons still live at home in Queens, New York, with a mother who, throughout the film and for no apparent reason, remains a nagging, joyless off-screen voice.

The maternal presence in *Mac* belongs to Alice (Katherine Borowitz, Turturro's real-life spouse), the woman Mac marries and brings home to live with the rest of his family. She is his emotional bulwark

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as well as his entrepreneurial assistant, and she gives him the son to whom he can impart his purist work ethic, even as it was imparted to him by his own father. Mac stands alone, or rather alongside his wife and child, at the end of the eight to ten years covered by the film, having been deserted by Vico and Bruno over the twin issues of obsessive workmanship and excessive working hours. Their departure spells for him not only the imperilment of his business, but also the disintegration of the extended Vitelli family. For Mac, family and business, kin and craft, go together, and a loss of faith in one cannot help but be succeeded by a loss of faith in the other. Only Mac keeps the faith in a world of declining values. Only Mac knows the road to take. Only Mac is or can ever be the master builder. Only Mac . . .

Mac is competently photographed, but Turturro and his cinematographer, Ron Fortunato, seem not to know that overhead or high-angle shots of the protagonist diminish his stature, not enhance it. *Riff-Raff* had its share of such shots, but there they were dramatically appropriate and thematically inclusive of other workers in addition to Stevie. As for the autumnal look of *Mac*, with its sepia tint and the predominance of grays and browns and blues, it tends to turn what is intended as a loving eulogy into a brooding elegy. Richard Termini and Vin Tese's original score, for its part, is alternately unexceptionable and obtrusive, like the film itself. Moreover, their inclusion of opera on the soundtrack at selected moments has the opposite effect of the one intended: instead of making the film seem "bigger" or more expansive, the operatic music makes *Mac* appear puny, even introverted, by comparison. For an example of what I mean, see the awkward, overextended fight between Mac and the contractor Polowski (Olek Krupa), overplayed to operatic strains. Turturro's fight-cum-wrestling match is no more than a melodramatic, anticlimactic action scene whose operatic score strains to give it a significance it does not have. Indeed, the scene goes on for so long that it takes on the nature of one of those acting exercises I referred to earlier, the unsolved problem here being how to fight and emote at the same time.

During other such acting exercises in *Mac*, notably between the Vitelli brothers and various women, the chief problem is how to emote and make love simultaneously. One of these women, an artist's model and (pseudo)intellectual from Manhattan named Oona (Ellen Barkin), is the film's big attempt to extend its orbit beyond the Italo-American enclave of Queens. Oona symbolizes the mystery and glamor, the opportunity, that await Bruno and Vico once they fly the Vitelli nest. The only trouble is, Oona's experience has nothing to do with Mac's, and it is his experience that so desperately cries out for parallel or contrast, doubling or relief—in other words, for simple extension beyond the prisonhouse of self, be that self Italian Catholic, Black Muslim, American Indian, or German Jew. In a nation now tragically divided by its minorities, John Turturro has wantonly created in his Mac a retrospective minority of one.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Albee and Pinter

LAST FALL, HAROLD PINTER'S FIRST FULL-LENGTH PLAY in fifteen years, *Moonlight,* appeared in London; while it was running, a pair of plays from fifteen years ago by Edward Albee, *Counting the Ways* and *Listening,* made their first appearance in New York. Pinter and Albee, almost exact contemporaries, have had parallel careers. Both made their names in the late fifties as part of the "Theatre of the Absurd" movement. By the sixties, they seemed the leading playwrights of their respective nations, but both faded distressingly early. Pinter has had a far more successful career overall (especially if you include his distinguished work as a stage director and as a screenwriter), but Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* still looms like Pike's Peak over the modest range of American drama of the past thirty-five years.

With the passage of time, it has become clear that Albee's greatest strength, oddly enough for a playwright, is as a writer of narrative. All his plays have punchy expository passages that are distinctively his own in style, yet also appropriate to the characters saying them. For years I have been using one of George's speeches from *Virginia Woolf,* about the boy who ordered "bergin" in a speakeasy, as an audition piece. The distinctively American rhythms and cadences, the shocking images that are tossed off casually (the boy "had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before, accidentally, completely accidentally, I have no doubt, no doubt at all"), the insinuation of psychological depth and multiple meanings, and the sheer accumulative effect of the narrative that ultimately steamrollers its listeners (rather like a Garrison Keillor story), never fails to impress casting directors, even if the fools usually end up rejecting me. "Who wrote *that*?" asked one such wide-eyed youngster. "It's so unusual!" Yes, young lady, I thought, so it is—unfortunately.

The later plays have exposition that can be equally haunting, but which has become undramatic. Famous speeches from the early plays, like the story of Jerry and the dog in *The Zoo Story,* or of the mutilated child in *The American Dream,* are pointedly intended by their speakers to intimidate or shock other characters. In the "bergin" speech in *Virginia Woolf,* George is not merely waxing nostalgic over part of his past life, but trying to puzzle and offend Nick, his listener. George implies that Nick resembles the babyish lad who was trying to appear so blasé. The fact that the speech has an *objective,* aimed at another character, makes it drama instead of mere narration; even though it

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is about the past, the speech is causing something to happen in the present. In the later plays, however, the speeches become mere lyricism for its own sake, beautiful but purposeless.

Albee's *Listening* takes place in a run-down formal garden. There are stone seats, and an Italianate marble fountain, now dry and full of leaves. A middle-aged couple, apparently former lovers, indifferently discuss old times. Their refined speech, including poetic quotations, makes them sound like intellectuals, though he now works as a cook. Both are in charge of a disturbed or retarded girl in her early twenties, who soon enters; perhaps they are her parents, perhaps her keepers. The woman repeatedly chides the girl; they bicker. The woman begins a long narrative about her past, punctuated by comments from the other two oddballs, culminating in a description of a girl (perhaps the same one we now see) she observed attempting suicide. The tale ends when the girl, in the dry fountain, actually slits her wrists and holds them up, gushing with blood.

The above description, I hope, conveys some of the mysterious, poetic quality of *Listening*, a dream-like play that may depict an actual dream. Nevertheless, the piece is static to the point of being soporific, unintentionally sending audience members off to their own dreamlands. The woman's narrative has no drive, no goal; she seems to be telling her story just for the pleasure of hearing it, rather than to get anything from the two listeners. Lack of communication was a great theme of Theatre of the Absurd, almost to the point of cliché; characters would talk obliquely, in hilarious or maddening fashion, but they were not *indifferent* to one another, as they are here. "You don't listen," complains the mad girl in *Listening*, which turns out to be literally true; the play's ironic title refers not to miscalculation or confusion, but to detachment.

Counting the Ways, written about the same time as *Listening* (1976), is more in the tradition of Absurdism. A middle-aged couple talk past each other, unable to express their feelings about their dying marriage. Most of the dialogue is inanely staccato and repetitive ("Do you *love* me?" "Hm? Pardon?" "Do you *love* me?" "Why do you ask?"), counterpointed by occasional non-sequitur monologues about poetry or flowers. The words imply psychological depth; they are indirect and allusive, with everything important left unsaid. The couple ("She" and "He") drift apart, even getting twin beds, then apparently have a reconciliation, but nothing is ever spelled out. *Counting the Ways* is short and underdeveloped, but vastly more dramatic than *Listening*, where the dialogue, although imagistic, has run out of steam, suggesting nothing beyond itself, and doing nothing onstage.

The Signature Theatre Company gave *Listening* and *Counting the Ways* their New York premieres in a tiny theatre in NoHo, as part of an Albee season. The playwright himself was in residence, directing *Counting the Ways* among several others. (*Listening* was directed by Paul Weidner.) The Signature Company, founded in 1991, is dedicated to

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exploring a playwright's body of work, having devoted seasons to Romulus Linney and Lee Blessing before Albee. Although the stage is minuscule, and the staging minimal, the level of performance was commendable, with good performances from an all-Equity cast, especially Jacqueline Brookes in the difficult role of the Woman in *Listening*. I applaud the work that Signature is doing, yet can only sigh at the small scale of it. Albee, one of America's finest dramatists, has in thirty years gone from a Broadway smash with *Virginia Woolf* to a modest retrospective in an obscure off-off-Broadway venue. This is partly an indictment of him, whose writing appears to have gone astray, but even more of our theatre. Is there a market anymore in America for serious dramatic writing? Would it matter how good Albee's later plays were? (The Broadway playhouse in which *Virginia Woolf* originally performed is now usually vacant.) A playwright can respond to an audience's love or hate, but not to its indifference.

Pinter's *Moonlight* concerns a dying man's alienation from his family. There are three simultaneous settings: the well-furnished bedroom where the man, Andy, lies musing and snarling, while Bel, his long-suffering but self-composed wife, sits at his bedside; the shabby bedroom of his son Fred, who lives in a different location from his father, where he is visited by his brother Jake; and a vague area behind and above the other two, where a daughter, Bridget, appears from time to time, and where there is a flashback scene of all three children as teenagers. Much of the play consists of exposition, from which it is clear that Andy brutalized his children, none of whom will now come to his bedside. Fred is sickly, looking worse than Andy, and spending much of his time in bed himself; Jake regularly swigs from a bottle of liquor on Fred's table; Bridget moves about dreamily, perhaps representing only a memory or a ghost. Only Bel maintains equilibrium, putting her husband down with a bland cheeriness: "You're not a bad man. You're just what we used to call a loudmouth. You can't help it. It's your nature. If you only kept your mouth shut more of the time life with you might just be tolerable."

Via all the narrative, we learn a good deal about the past, and a few things about the present. Andy was a civil servant, whose bureaucratic attitude carried over into his home life. ("Love is an attribute no civil servant worth his salt would give house room to. It's redundant. An excrescence.") He philandered, but Bel had an affair with a former pal of his, a football referee. Fred has a mortal disease (AIDS?). Ultimately, however, *Moonlight* is just as static a play as Albee's *Listening*. All its important events took place in the past; the only thing of interest in the present is what does *not* happen. Bel finally telephones Fred to tell him that Andy is nearing the end, but the two brothers refuse to come, or even to listen, obstinately announcing "Chinese laundry" whenever they pick up the phone. The action is centrifugal, as a family falls apart, hopelessly estranged from one another.

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In Pinter's early plays, the action was centripetal. One of my students described its pattern as the home team versus the visitors; there was a conflict between members of an established household (however bizarre) and one or more unwanted intruders, with the intruders usually winning. It was never clear what the background of the characters was, nor even why the grotesque encounter was taking place, but the clash was always joltingly dramatic, with a resolution that was succinct and definite. In *Moonlight,* the traditional pattern is all turned around. We learn far too much about the characters' backgrounds, while their conflict is attenuated and inconclusive.

Pinter's *Moonlight,* directed by David Leveaux, opened at the Almeida Theatre in London in September, and was so successful that it moved on to the West End; it will probably end up in New York fairly soon. Ian Holm, who also had not been near a stage for a long time, was superb as Andy, tempering the character's nastiness with humor; Anna Massey matched him as Bel, serenely aloof and articulate. The rest of the cast seemed less capable, but my irritation with their performances may have only been the result of their characters' limitless detachment.

In sum, both Albee and Pinter appear to have degenerated, late in their careers, into mere poets. (The same could have been said of the late Samuel Beckett, an influence on both, and a friend of Pinter.) It is ironic that Theatre of the Absurd, which expressed a powerful skepticism about language, should in their hands have ultimately become a monument to it. In place of conflict and wit, we now have narrative and lyricism. Theatre of the Absurd was a send-up of language, an expression of deep skepticism about the possibilities of communication; the skepticism remains, but introspective linguistic beauty rather than bizarre juxtapositions and illogicalities are the result. Albee's, Pinter's, and Beckett's late plays are imaginative and poignant, but they belong in the study, not in the theatre.

Tony Randall's National Actors Theatre, after an anemic opening season two years ago, improved substantially last year as result of a brilliant innovation—hiring a good director. Michael Langham, former head of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada, staged a lively production of Shaw's *St. Joan* that finally brought the NAT credibility. Last year, Langham went one better, staging a *Timon of Athens* that was the best overall Shakespeare I have ever seen in the United States, which was no surprise, since it was a Canadian production (with English star), transferred with a few cast changes. Pretty soon, the NAT will become known as Stratford South.

Shakespeare's *Timon,* which is rarely performed, tells the simple tale of a wealthy merchant in ancient Athens whose generosity and lavish parties have given him troupes of friends. When he loses his money, the friends leave too (surprise!). Timon then goes off to live in a cave, where he rails against mankind, and dies. Except for the ending, it

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recalls *The Great Gatsby;* perhaps as a result, Langham staged the piece in the 1920s, using music by Duke Ellington. Wonder of wonders, the concept worked. Douglas Stein's lovely Art Deco settings in the initial parts of the play contrasted effectively with a kind of *Waiting for Godot* desert for the ending; Ann Hould-Ward's costumes were stylish and telling; Ellington's music provided brittle elegance, playing underneath the action much of the time.

Langham's masterful staging yielded brisk pace, lively action (despite a play that is rather short on plot), deft handling of groups, and inventive detail. The party scenes included a Josephine Baker dancer adding to the merriment, an episode among Timon's malicious creditors was ominously set in a steam bath, and a brief battle scene (there is a subplot about Alcibiades, who leaves Athens in a huff, and later comes back to conquer it) became a deft, violent counterpoint to the restrained main action.

I have long found Brain Bedford to be miscast in Shakespeare's more muscular roles, but his charm and ease made him perfect for middle-class Timon. John Franklyn-Robbins matched him nicely as the Cynic philosopher Apemantus, dressed as a seedy professor in a baggy brown suit. Franklyn-Robbins is another Englishman, but the Americans in the cast held their own among the British and Canadians, especially Michael Cumpsty as Alcibiades. In fact, there was not a single poor speaker or actor in the entire bunch. Every line was perfectly clear, despite dialogue heavy with poeticizing and philosophizing (even by Shakespearean standards), and spoken with both comprehension and emotional truth. Long live Langham at the NAT! Long live Canadian Shakespeare! But what nation does the *National* Actors Theatre refer to?

It is easy to satirize Hollywood; the question is whether Hollywood really deserves it. John Patrick Shanley got a million dollars and an Oscar for writing the screenplay of *Moonstruck,* and will never forgive Hollywood for it. His *Four Dogs and a Bone,* which played at the Manhattan Theatre Club in November, rounds up the usual suspects: a thoroughly venal producer, a brainless starlet sleeping her way to fame, a ruthless but fading older actress, and a boorish young writer (the last apparently *not* modeled on Shanley himself). All are working on an independent feature that will probably never see a movie theatre ("straight to video" is predicted), but the focus is on their bickering and backstabbing rather than on actual filmmaking. The producer manipulates the others shamelessly as his financing becomes ever more precarious; he develops an anal ulcer "the size of a shrimp," an affliction that recalls the sickly King in *All's Well that Ends Well,* but which here barely slows the fellow down.

Given the many evils of our nation—pollution, homelessness, financial chicanery, religious zealotry and hypocrisy, crime, unemployment—why choose the film industry to satirize? Hollywood

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pollutes little, employs many (usually at high salaries), and is a major export industry in a country with a huge trade deficit. Many American movies and television shows are notoriously crass and stupid, but, on the whole, a surprising number are very good indeed, including Shanley's *Moonstruck*. The producer in *Four Dogs* is roguish and mercenary, but these qualities are an inevitable consequence in an industry that is wide open to genuine competition. Compared to Ivan Boesky manipulating billions in pension funds, Shanley's producer, anal ulcer and all, comes off as a free-enterprise paragon.

Shanley himself directed *Four Dogs* at the Manhattan Theatre Club in November, staging the piece awkwardly on its thrust stage, so that audience at the sides (including me) saw precious little of the action. Tony Roberts gave a strong performance as the producer, while Mary-Louise Parker was wonderful as the dopey/shrewd starlet. The show was thus amusing, but ultimately forgettable.

How does a fashionably anti-intellectual director begin a play? With a fifteen-minute pedantic lecture, of course. Peter Sellars introduced his production of Aeschylus' *The Persians* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles by coming out onstage himself and telling the audience, in an affable manner, that we were about to see something "unusual and extraordinary." If there was no dialogue,[1] that was good, because the Greeks were interested in sheer human presence. If there was no plot, that was good too, because we should focus on the sound of the words. If we couldn't hear all the words, that was still good, because emotion is more important than meaning. And if audience members walked out, as hundreds had done during previous performances, "Now, that's what I call theatre!"

Thoroughly insured against failure (bad would be good, while good would be—also good), the performance itself at last began. The large open stage at the Taper was backed by a huge white cyclorama, creating a sense of vast space. The entire setting consisted of two small chairs, and a small rug on the floor. Over microphones, an actor on one of the chairs read the opening speech of the Chorus in a loud, rhetorical manner, while another actor, on the rug, simultaneously read the very same words introspectively, with quiet emotion. Despite the literal double-entendre, the speech was clear enough, but perplexing, half Aeschylus and half CNN News, with references to gods, shrines, and oracles juxtaposed with others to exploding bridges, cluster bombs, and shell shock. It soon became apparent that Sellars and writer Robert Auletta had turned *The Persians* into a diatribe against the American victory in Operation Desert Storm. Scenes and

[1] Much of the production consisted of monologues, which in fact *are* dialogue, the prefix *dia* not meaning two, but by or through; everything conveyed by a play by or through speech (i.e., *logos*, word), as opposed to sound, music, or visual effects, is part of its dialogue.

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characters followed closely those in Aeschylus, but the speeches endlessly assailed American cruelty. (And for all the business about language being unimportant, the speeches were slowly and lovingly intoned, as if each were a literary gem.) Finally, the Persian leader Xerxes, dressed and made up to look like Saddam Hussein but sounding like Al Pacino, came in and triumphantly announced, "I dared to take on the greatest power in the world." That he did it by first invading a much weaker country, Kuwait, had never been acknowledged throughout the play.

While I, like many Americans, share Sellars' and Auletta's misgivings about the whole Desert Storm operation, turning a 2400-year-old play into a mindless anti-American tirade was not only unpatriotic but misdirected. Aeschylus' play is admirable—and nearly unique in literature, ancient or modern—for depicting a recently-defeated enemy sympathetically. What Aeschylus does not do, however, is depict his own side, the Greeks, as bloodthirsty maniacs. The point of the original is that the most powerful nation then in existence, Persia, went overboard in its lust for conquest, and was harshly but justly punished by a plucky underdog; the Sellars/Auletta modern version conversely depicts a gallant *little* country getting *unjustly* clobbered by a depraved superpower. An updated version of Aeschylus' play might work if set in the Vietnam War, with *us* as the Persians and the Vietnamese as the Greeks, but the only thing *The Persians* has in common with Operation Desert Storm is that the Iraqis inhabit a portion of the ancient Persian Empire.

But even if Sellars' production fit its text better, it would still be wrong-headed. The notion that theatre exists to send audiences moral messages, and that the best way to produce a classic is to reduce it to a few such messages and then hammer them to death, is shallow, condescending, and unartistic. Even a playwright as politically committed as Bertolt Brecht (who adapted classics in addition to writing his own plays) realized that theatre has to be open and unpretentious if it is to entertain and ultimately move its audiences. The Sellars approach, which is now the standard way of producing classical drama in America, reduces the audience to passive recipients, with nothing left for them to ponder or imagine. It preaches to the converted, and does not convince even them.

Jonathan Tolin's *Twilight of the Golds* is an old-fashioned problem play about a problem so new that it does not yet even exist. A pregnant woman discovers, via a test invented a few years from now, that the child she is carrying will be homosexual. Should she have an abortion? In a second-act obligatory scene, her gay brother argues for tolerance, gay rights, the significant accomplishments of gay people, and, somehow, the joys of Wagnerian opera; the infant might become another Siegfried. Nonetheless, the woman decides to have the abortion. End of fetus, and end of play, which was so clunkily

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constructed that its premise was not even disclosed (though everyone in the audience had long since figured it out) until the conclusion of the first act. Last year, I saw its premiere in Pasadena, from which it toured a number of cities before coming to Broadway in October. Closing after a few weeks, it barely deserves mention, except to point out a significant bit of inside information: my colleagues from the University of California, Riverside, Martin Aronstein and John Iacovelli, who designed the lights and set, noted that, during its countrywide tour, the show never needed more than three stagehands; for Broadway, union rules demanded twelve! The Broadway theatre in which it appeared, the Booth, originally had an act curtain requiring two men to operate; it was replaced some twenty years ago with a one-person model, but, you guessed it, producers still have to hire two. Next time you wonder why Broadway ticket prices, now shooting past fifty dollars apiece, rise faster than inflation, ponder how much of your money is going to greedy, pigheaded unions.

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DAVID DOOLEY

In the Interest of Society

IN *A PLACE AT THE TABLE: The Gay Individual in American Society*[1] Bruce Bawer argues forcefully and often eloquently for the end of discrimination against gays and lesbians, for the acceptance of same-sex marriages, and for the complete integration of gays and lesbians throughout society. To his great credit, the book wholly lacks self-pity, paranoia, or special pleading. While admitting that he has known both the impulse to rage and the impulse to retreat to the closet, he remarks that to succumb to either temptation would be "neither wise nor responsible." Bawer's overarching thesis is that everyone, heterosexual or homosexual, should work to end discrimination against gays, not to help a particular minority group, but to benefit society as a whole. Furthermore, Bawer argues these views from the standpoint of political conservatism.

No one should be surprised to find homosexuals throughout the political spectrum. Bawer tells of attending a dinner for young conservative writers at a New York think tank and realizing that this was one of the gayest crowds he'd ever seen outside of a gay bar. Many gays and lesbians could attest that the political opinions of their friends do not accurately predict the degree of acceptance. For instance, the former senator once known as "Mr. Conservative," Barry Goldwater, staunchly supported an end to the ban on gays and lesbians in the military. As a conservative, Bawer doesn't hesitate to name Fidel Castro the most successful homophobe in the Western Hemisphere. Unlike the prose of some leftish academics, Bawer's writing has no snob appeal; well-written and quotable, *A Place at the Table* can be understood by anyone with a decent high-school education. Memorably he identifies the elements common to both the religious right and the politically correct left: an opposition to "high culture, tolerance, free speech, freedom of worship, and individual rights."

In the first chapter Bawer tells of seeing a boy about fifteen look furtively around a bookstore and, when he thought no one was watching, turn the pages of a gay newspaper. Remembering himself at that age, he wonders what kinds of misinformation and prejudice the youth will encounter, and wonders too what the boy will make of

[1] A PLACE AT THE TABLE: The Gay Individual in American Society, by *Bruce Bawer*. Poseidon Press/Simon & Schuster. $21.00.

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the images of sexy models, leathermen, and drag queens in the newspaper. The book's double-hinged argument develops from these ponderings: Bawer examines both how gays suffer from societal prejudice and how they suffer from believing the myths of the gay subculture.

Bawer marshals the arguments for accepting homosexuality and demolishes the arguments against acceptance with great skill. He concisely discusses the inadequately translated Bible passages still cited as justification for homophobia, basing his analysis on such books as John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.* A practicing Christian, he regards the attitudes of some churches more in sorrow than in anger. (As a Southerner, I'm only too aware that the Southern Protestant churches that now quote Bible verses against homosexuality also quoted Bible verses to uphold slavery, to denounce child-labor laws, and to defend segregation.) He quotes one Catholic priest as saying that the church must "simply apologize and beg forgiveness of the gay community." As Bawer observes, no other prejudice makes people feel more morally justified. He also shrewdly points out the primary reason some people think homosexuality is wrong: it makes them uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable at the sight or even the thought of a same-sex couple may be understandable, given our common history; it is certainly human; it has no relationship, however, to morality.

Painstakingly Bawer exposes the rationalizations conservative writers have given to avoid supporting gay rights. Unlike proponents of the religious right, mainstream conservatives such as the columnists William F. Buckley, Jr., and Mona Charen are unwilling to rely on scriptural tradition or papal authority unsupported by reason. They no longer believe that gay men and women are evil or sick. Some of them like to emphasize that they have gay friends. Nonetheless, they are unwilling to support the end to discrimination against gays, if only, as Bawer says, because they feel that would be seen as bowing to liberalism or, worse, political correctness. Their final position is, in effect, "Of course I have gay friends . . . but I wouldn't want them to have rights equal to mine."

Typically, an author in *Commentary* rationalizes that prohibitions against homosexuality must be kept in place to discourage "waverers" who, with some official help, might lead heterosexual lives. Like Bawer, I've never met anyone who fell into this category; I doubt that anyone has ever become gay because of inadequate exposure to heterosexual pressure. Apparently this author concedes that the so-called "waverers" are really homosexually inclined by nature but are willing to force themselves to lead heterosexual lives, an effort this author finds heroic. Bawer has another term for this kind of denial: moral cowardice. I have rarely read so forthright a denunciation of those who refuse to admit their sexual orientation. To Bruce Bawer, dishonesty of any kind is not a virtue, let alone a virtue essential to

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society. A moral realist through and through, he understands the carnage that results when a husband or wife is finally unable to continue the imposture and families are torn apart. He notes that only two views of homosexuality are internally consistent: that it is an immoral choice all ethical people must deplore or that it is a morally neutral condition to which certain people are born. He further observes that only the second view is consistent with the facts, which means that disapproval is not a morally legitimate option.

In all likelihood, those who talk about "waverers" or offer other rationalizations for discrimination against gays have never listened to actual gay teenagers. For example, a friend who worked in an alternate school for the emotionally disturbed spoke of an effeminate long-haired boy of sixteen who looked rather like Julia Roberts. Some of the other students taunted him about being gay. Not surprisingly, he said he had a girlfriend. To my friend's straight colleagues, that settled that. He said he had a girlfriend, so he couldn't be gay, so there was no problem. My friend thought the boy was both gay and suicidally depressed but didn't say anything for fear of losing his job. As Bawer observes, some people who are afraid of openly gay teachers think nothing of entrusting their children to priests.

Not long ago, I attended a meeting of P-FLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). A quiet college student wondered how to come out to his parents, who are charismatic Catholics; another wanted to come out to parents who'd actively fought against a gay-rights measure. One woman mentioned that her son, a handsome young athlete, had been depressed and contemplated suicide before he accepted his sexual orientation. Another woman mentioned that her son had in fact tried to kill himself, which prompted a nineteen-year-old whom Hollywood would have cast as someone's happy-go-lucky kid brother to volunteer casually that he'd tried to commit suicide twice. This is the reality apologists for homophobia ignore: the result of misinformation, prejudice, discriminatory laws, and silence. Bawer comments that many heterosexuals expect from gays a degree of reticence about their personal lives that, if they tried to carry it off for a week, would make them feel they were in prison. A married couple at the same P-FLAG meeting talked about how they had started editing their answers to questions about their son, now that they know he is gay, and have begun to realize how much editing he has been forced to do.

One of the most valuable sections of *A Place at the Table* analyzes the full range of anti-gay vocabulary: "lifestyle," "agenda," "family values," "recruit," "promote," "equivalent," and so on. Bawer comments that "It sounds better to say that you don't want your children taught about 'the gay lifestyle' than to say that you don't want your children to learn tolerance." Would anyone write that "George Bush and David Koresh led the heterosexual lifestyle"? (Actually, I've never known the word "lifestyle" to be used meaningfully in serious writing.) Bawer

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also attacks the use of "agenda" to imply "shady characters who have a sinister secret plan." The cultural diffusion of "agenda" in this metaphorical sense supports Bawer's thesis about the similarities between political correctness and the religious right. "Agenda," originally used by some left-wing academics to sneer at those whose political ideas they scorned, was quickly seized by radical right-wingers as a useful tool for gay-bashing.

As Bawer says, "Nothing has been more vile than the use of the word 'family' as a club with which to beat gays." Real families not infrequently have gay members. Proponents of "family values" would reject actual family members in the name of a sanitized notion of family which has rarely existed outside of 1950s sitcoms. Most gays and lesbians want to be as close to their families as is possible for their psychological well-being.

Perhaps the accusations that "Gays want to recruit others to be gay" and that "Gays want special rights" merely result from ignorance, which cynical demagogues are eager to exploit. On the other hand, Bawer might consider the possibility that these accusations result from psychological projection. Think of the pressure on homosexuals to deny their feelings, to "change," to marry; think of all the books, movies, and ads glorifying heterosexual love. Shouldn't this be considered "recruiting"? The notion of "special rights" presents an even more blatant case. What is marriage, with its privileges of property, inheritance, and authority to give medical instructions, if not a special right for heterosexuals? Most people assume that the right to show affection to a loved one in public is reserved for heterosexuals. Many heterosexuals believe they have the special right to exclude any mention of homosexuality from schools and work-places. Far from wanting "special rights," gays and lesbians want an end to special rights.

While acknowledging the success of confrontational gay groups such as ACT UP in making experimental drugs more available for people with AIDS, Bawer suggests that such tactics are ineffective in gaining wide public support for gay-rights laws and for open acknowledgment of gay relationships. Indeed, some of the protests Bawer details seem calculated to drive even well-disposed heterosexuals screaming into the arms of Pat Robertson. Bawer has no use for the political act as self-expression, so that those participating can feel a sense of, in the current cliché, "empowerment." He does not refer to the similar attack on the politics of self-expression in Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen's *After the Ball*, to some extent an even harsher attack since it seems to come from deeper within the gay subculture. In seeking self-expression and ignoring the probable effect of their rhetoric and actions, some confrontational groups, Bawer believes, have failed in their responsibility to the gay community as a whole.

Bawer equally has no use for the kind of pride that comes from belonging to a group; real pride, he says, "is a hard-won individual

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attribute." The one thing most gays have in common, he notes, is the experience of homophobia. The hallmark of gay subculture, as Bawer sees it and rejects it, is "the notion that life, for homosexuals, naturally revolves around sex more than it does for heterosexuals." I don't think Bawer sufficiently recognizes the extent to which this is a heterosexual stereotype which gays have internalized; he does note, in describing a particularly inept protest, that the protesters seemed to have "subconsciously accepted the mainstream culture's harshest judgments of them and sought to defuse the pain of disapproval through self-parody."

In his discussion of what he calls gay subculture, Bawer tends to conflate gay bar subculture with the more extreme forms of political activism. Perhaps this accurately reflects the situation in New York, but it scarcely describes the situation in most of America. Some cities with gay bars have only small or ineffective political groups, if any at all. Bars are where most men and women first encounter the gay subculture and sometimes learn to act in stereotypical ways. While Bawer's encouragement for gays to move beyond stereotypes is commendable, it's easy to forget that for young men from small towns or farms or city slums, effeminacy may seem an attainable kind of sophistication.

If liberals tend to overestimate the importance of institutions, conservatives tend to overestimate the importance of individual efforts. This conservative bias prevents Bawer from recognizing specifically gay institutions which further the kind of stable relationships and open society he wants. Gay community centers, sports organizations, rodeo and square dance clubs, professional organizations, and social clubs, to name only a few, tend to promote responsible adult behavior. So do volunteer organizations which assist those with AIDS. So do some political groups. Meeting someone while playing volleyball or square dancing or working to elect a city council member is a far cry from meeting someone late at night in a dimly lit bar while loud music blares. Organizations like P-FLAG seek to bring families, and indeed society, together in exactly the way Bawer urges.

In his emphasis on the case for gay marriage, Bawer tends to neglect another important stabilizing force: friendship. For some gay men and women, friends have become a substitute or augmented family. Having been forced to find out who their real friends are, many gays and lesbians value them accordingly.

Bawer's suggestion that gay marriage ought to be the centerpiece of gay political efforts seems to me mistaken. Surely for most gays and lesbians an end to job discrimination is the most pressing need. His downplaying of the need for legislative and judicial change in favor of changing the hearts and minds of individuals (again, his conservative bias) does not seem realistic. If black civil rights leaders had followed this policy, chances are that not one school in the South would ever have been integrated.

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Despite minor reservations, I would unhesitatingly recommend *A Place at the Table* to anyone just coming out, to parents and friends of someone gay, to gays who want to think about the best means of achieving political goals, and to all those willing to confront their own assumptions about homosexuality. Believing that "the ultimate enemy of anti-gay prejudice . . . is the truth," Bawer praises all the gay men and women "who in small but brave and meaningful ways bring illumination every day to those among whom they live and work and worship." Political courage, to Bawer, means "living among hostile people who, by virtue of mundane daily encounters, gradually become less fearful and hostile." The "sensible—and truly conservative—way of dealing with the fact of homosexuality," he observes, "would be to arrange society in such a way that homosexuals can grow into well-integrated and productive members of it as easily as their heterosexual counterparts." As Bawer says, anti-gay reactionaries cannot keep anyone from being gay, only from being honest.

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THOMAS FILBIN

Joseph Epstein's Pantheon

ONCE UPON A TIME THE LITERARY ESSAY was a creature as likely to be found in the sitting rooms of the generally read as in the studies of professors. It was a short, discursive work on a subject, writer, or book which treated life and letters as necessarily bound together, rather than separate and distinct.

The literary essay today is more commonly a theory piece, something that purports to discuss literature but never mentions its name. It now might explore where power lies, or demonstrate how "texts" (as opposed to books) are indeterminate, leaving criticism to disavow the notion of rendering judgment in favor of being subversive or merely controversial.

Joseph Epstein makes it clear where his sympathies lie in the introduction to the latest collection of his work.[1] His personal background, he says, consisted of "acquiring a fair amount of literary history—a history of the lives and conditions of writers and the progress of literary forms and genres. . . ." The result of this is "a belief in the richness of life . . . that . . . will always mock any attempts to schematize it." He further observes that, "The disadvantage of a literary point of view is that those who seek it—or are stuck with it—give up the notion of ever possessing a small body of mastering ideas that might explain the world for them. (This, of course, has come to seem less a disadvantage as, at the end of the twentieth century, such ideas—among them Marxism, Freudianism, variants of Structuralism—are today, if not totally bankrupt, at least in Chapter Eleven.)"

In the eighteen selections in this volume, Epstein navigates by the longitudes and latitudes of coherence and factual analysis, believing the traditional form of the essay as practiced by the likes of Samuel Johnson and Edmund Wilson to be timeless and in no need of apologists.

Pertinent Players is devoted to particular figures in letters and public life (the fact that they are nearly all men will surely be noted by the author's detractors), and is a pantheon of notables who in Epstein's assessment transcend their own age. If this were a physical place, it would be late Georgian with niches and busts, scrolls and bunting, and

[1] PERTINENT PLAYERS: Essays on the Literary Life, by *Joseph Epstein*. W.W. Norton & Co. $24.95.

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vaulted ceilings that would inspire reverence. The admittees are ones he finds interesting or was asked to consider in reviewing books concerning them. (The essays originally appeared in *Commentary*, *The Hudson Review*, and *The New Criterion*.) His subjects fascinate him, he says, for different reasons. In some instances he asks why individuals achieved what they did against the odds, while others failed despite all the predictors of success being in place.

His modus operandi is to be classically expository, interesting, and sympathetic, while posing some question or taking up the cause of a reputation deserving an upgrade from second class. Here Epstein is king of the hill, writing clearly and succinctly, adding to each pound of revelation a dollop of wit.

He opens with a stirring overture; "The Mere Common Sense of Sydney Smith" highlights the English clergyman whose aphorisms amused Dickens, Queen Victoria, and Abraham Lincoln. One of the founders of *The Edinburgh Review*, he was a satirist and critic whose candor probably cost him the bishopric his worldly ambitions coveted. His striking characteristic for Epstein is the refusal to grumble over the cards dealt: "If my lot be to crawl, I will crawl contentedly; if to fly, I will fly with alacrity; but as long as I can possibly avoid it I will never be unhappy."

Smith wrote in support of religious toleration, education of the poor without flogging, and much preferred the pleasures of beef, beer, and books to dour religious doctrines. Epstein's treatment of him is affectionate without becoming sentimental; and the same manner is adopted in the closing essay, "Remembering Sidney Hook." Hook, unusual in being a public philosopher in twentieth-century America, applied rational argument to political and social issues, and had an unshakable commitment to that method when others were too easily swayed by ideologies. Epstein liked Hook for many things, not the least of which was having a sufficient sense of the ridiculous to recall in his memoirs an incident with Bertrand Russell at a Greenwich Village party; while Russell was trying to put the moves on a beautiful woman, Hook pestered him as to whether he still believed in the theory of types.

The most insightful piece is on the life and work of Desmond MacCarthy, a man who was offered membership in the Apostles as a Cambridge undergraduate. He had the early promise of greatness without ever becoming great, but was wise enough as a critic "not to have been interested in the last word; only in having his say." The result, argues Epstein, is that what some might disparagingly term "familiar criticism" holds up very well even forty years after MacCarthy's death. "The Short Happy Life of Robert Louis Stevenson" is in the same tone, praising a scribbler who spent his limited time on earth in permanent domestic chaos and generally bad health but who nevertheless cranked out estimable prose that won the approval even of Henry James.

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"Ben Hecht, the Great Hack Genius" praises the talent who sold himself to Hollywood but never valued money, and who grew up in the Chicago Renaissance where being a newspaperman meant living in the tumultuous human laboratory of "whorehouses and madhouses, courtrooms and poolrooms, hangings and fires, riots and theatricals." Hecht perhaps comes closest to Epstein's definition of a fascinating writer by virtue of being one "whose failures are more instructive than his successes." He was in his time a journalist, novelist, poet, movie director, screenwriter, and womanizer. The critic Harry Hansen called Hecht "the Pagliacci of the fire escape," and Ezra Pound once said he preferred to be an expatriate because, "There is only one intelligent man in the whole United States to talk to—Ben Hecht."

Amidst all this merriment, Epstein takes up the issue of H.L. Mencken and anti-Semitism in "Mencken On Trial," an essay which has the pace and structure of an interesting criminal proceeding at the Old Bailey. Epstein allows the case for the prosecution to go forward without interruption. Mencken diary entries about Jews do not sit well, certainly not with Epstein who calls himself "one of those touchy Jews . . . generally on the lookout for insult, a veritable truffle dog of anti-Semitism." But in conducting the case for the defense, Epstein points out troubling inconsistencies in the prosecution's evidence. Mencken's feelings about Jews were difficult to fix on a slide for clear viewing. He was a man given to generalizations and so contentious and opinionated that he often contradicted himself. The Mencken who might make a note in his diary about a "young," "suitable," "intelligent," "shrewd" or even "Hollywood" Jew is to Epstein the culture-bound Mencken who democratically mocked all ethnic groups including his own "Krauts." Mencken's convincing character witness is the passionate farewell column (January 1, 1939) he wrote for the *Baltimore Sun* titled "The Problem of the Refugees," which insisted that the United States should shoulder the refugee burden of German Jews, and scolded those "political mountebanks who fill the air with hollow denunciations of Hitler, and yet never lift a hand to help an actual Jew." With Epstein as counsel for the defense, Mencken gets off with a hung jury if not an outright acquittal.

Other fine selections in this book concern Chamfort, William Hazlitt, Italo Svevo, Maurice Baring, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Carl Sandburg. In all of these Epstein is informed and deliberate, producing boldly drawn portraits that never lapse into caricature.

If Epstein has a fault, it is his tendency to become a casual polemicist by sometimes not taking time to present reasons for what he dislikes. It is never wise for a critic to descend to being a mere curmudgeon. If you are determined to give offense, it seems a better strategy at least to fire your shots at a target rather than simply let the gun discharge into the air. In "Selling Henry James," Epstein men-

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tions a course in James he once taught, during which, in a discussion about a possible homosexual relationship between characters in the story "The Pupil," a student "remarked dryly that perhaps there ought to be a statute of limitations on discovering homosexuality in literature." Epstein quotes the statement approvingly, but does not seem to feel it necessary to explain why it is desirable for a student or critic so amiably to put on the blinkers when confronted with a question of interpretation.

"First Person Singular," a consideration of several contemporary autobiographies, is marred a bit when Epstein takes Shirley Abbott to task for "feminudging," which I infer is his pejorative for maintaining a general tone of complaint that women in literature, either as authors represented on the bookshelves, or even as subjects of stories, haven't always fared well. Epstein thinks it a mark of silliness for anyone to go on in this way, no doubt because of his general antipathy toward what he and others operating from the neo-conservative side of the trenches deem the unwarranted balkanization of literature by the new academicians he takes delight in thumping. There is surely much silliness in the remedies some of these cultural warriors propose, but it is unbecoming to a writer of Epstein's intelligence to make statements which imply that literary neglect on account of gender is either a myth, or if true is immaterial. Say it ain't so, Joe.

Epstein's two previous alliterative collections, *Plausible Prejudices* and *Partial Payments,* combine with *Pertinent Players* to create a body of work that I hope continues. Those to his left will continue to pummel him because he writes about "pale males" and is no doubt incorrigibly Eurocentric. But his or anyone's views are his own to hold and justify, and I consider this a point that needs to be writ large: shouldn't a critic have an inalienable right to like any writer he pleases? Advocating one's favorites is only prescription, not proscription. A list of authors well loved is not a canon which condemns others to oblivion.

Joseph Epstein's importance lies in having a willful affection for his subjects that doesn't rise or fall with the fashion. He eschews theories of literature in favor of the practice of literature, and aims to deliver a broader version of truth than the narrowness of specialization permits. And I for one would prefer an essay on man to an essay on one man's pancreas.

Epstein is droll and earnest company, and even if you aren't a member of his particular sect of literature, the tour of its hall of heroes is not to be missed.

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SONYA RUDIKOFF

A Marriage in the Thirties and Forties

MANY PEOPLE HAVE WAITED FOR THIS BOOK.[1] The author, eighty-eight years old, is nearly blind. Composition proceeded by means of dictation, which made it more arduous than usual, and not the ideal way to write a long and difficult book. The late novels of Henry James were produced by dictation and they suffered the hazards of this method, namely, intricacy and prolixity, although they gained in grandeur and complexity. In less perceptive writers, or addressed to dictating machines, the method may be damaging to intellectual and creative coherence. Unlike Milton, modern writers do not have attentive daughters waiting with pencils in hand but have to pay for secretarial help. Mrs. Trilling thanks her publishers for their generosity in helping defray these expenses, but there is no doubt that dictation added to her difficulties in composing this memoir, which would have been taxing in even the best of circumstances. She persevered nevertheless, and now has presented her efforts to the reading public. The story of her life, especially in the thirties and forties, and of her marriage to Lionel Trilling, and of the various strands gathered in her experience, is compelling and moving. Particularly for a younger literary generation the book will be of interest, readers for whom the Trillings as a literary couple do not have the iconic meaning they once had.

Lionel Trilling died in 1975. In the years since then, Mrs. Trilling has written essays and other books, among them her book about the sensational murder case of the Scarsdale doctor and Jean Harris, the headmistress at Madeira. She has written on matters of political and literary interest, she has been active in the publication of her late husband's unpublished works, and she has been a figure in the seminar established in his name at Columbia University, the educational institution with which he was identified during most of his career.

The liberal anti-Stalinism which the Trillings represented has collapsed with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and the decline of its ideology and influence throughout the West, a power

[1] THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling, by *Diana Trilling*. Harcourt, Brace & Company. $24.95.

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and ideology which was the Trillings' subject for so many years. Liberalism survives, but its enemies are different now. These two articulate Trilling voices spoke individually, but they were of course known together, and together represented certain positions in the political and literary discourse now so much changed. The death of one of the Trillings meant the breakup of that significant union which stood at the center of the New York literary life she describes. If E.M. Forster were questioned about it, he might even have compared the Trillings to the Webbs or to D.H. Lawrence and Frieda, as a similarly formidable couple who, he said, gave him the feeling that he was dealing with a firm. Since 1975, he would have seen that one member of the "firm" of Trilling & Trilling has carried on alone. Forster, who remained unmarried and unattached, both perceived something and also missed something about united couples. In spite of the obvious sorrow and loss, however, and the continuing sense of an absence that can never be erased, the years since 1975 have not been without their rewards for Diana Trilling.

The book essentially stops at 1950, when the Trillings were forty-five. Not because nothing happened to them thereafter. A great deal happened, especially the flowering of Lionel Trilling's reputation as a man of letters, and as a teacher, and the growth of Diana Trilling's renown as an essayist. But even as she moves back and forth through the years, recounting events in the sixties, such as the riots at Columbia, Mrs. Trilling notes in her introduction that by 1950 the pattern of their lives was set and would not change substantially. The fourteen chapters discourse upon aspects of the Trillings' life, and their sequence is thematic not chronological. The matter of their Jewish identities, their experiences with psychoanalysis, their political histories, the character of New York intellectual life in the thirties and forties, the beginnings of Diana's own literary career, Lionel's complicated career in the Columbia English Department—each provides the focus for a cluster of ruminations, self-analysis, reminiscence. Some material comes up several times, in different contexts. Personages now well-known for their role in the history of New York intellectual life are described or recreated. Even Mrs. Trilling's own work is subjected to her sharp scrutiny, and her husband's work is discussed in relation to his personal difficulties, his social and political views, and his influence on students.

Throughout this examination of their marriage and their work, Mrs. Trilling is also engaged in a running argument with those who have interpreted them differently. She is indignant about the idealization of Lionel Trilling that seems to have occurred—the smoothly modulated ironic gentlemanly figure, of grace, good manners, even, some would have said, of contrived *manner,* is a distortion, is not the man as he should be known. If, as some think, she has written too openly of his depressions, his hostility, his intermittent cruelty to her, it is surely in order to reject what seems to her a narrow and

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inaccurate sense of the man whom she knew for more than forty-seven years. Truth and justice demand that a fuller and more grainy view of him should prevail, she believes. His troubled spirit, his tragic sense of life, his disappointments and self-doubt, the contradictions in his story, give depth and complexity to what he wrote and what he was. She thinks he would not like to have been robbed of them.

This book reminds the reader, as it was intended to do, of the title of Lionel Trilling's 1947 novel, *The Middle of the Journey,* which dealt with the world of New York liberals and intellectuals in relation to the ideals and illusions of contemporary life, especially the politics of Communism. It was a much-read and much-discussed book, and later it seemed extremely pertinent to the explosion of events such as the Hiss case and the Congressional investigations into Communist influence in the arts, politics, government, and foreign policy. Themes related to the novel also provided the subject for some of Lionel's stories of the fifties, like "The Other Margaret" and "Of This Time, Of That Place," which still have a wide enthusiastic public. Diana also published a number of absorbing essays related to these themes, such as a discussion of the Oppenheimer case, the Columbia events, and other critical moments in the tangled progress of culture.

Still, her title is puzzling. How is it to be understood? It calls up *The Middle of the Journey,* which itself deliberately provoked a memory of Dante's famous lines beginning *The Divine Comedy:*

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita.

In Trilling's novel, "the middle of the journey" was a critical moment in the life of its hero. But this biography of the marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling seems to take *the marriage* as the beginning of their journey of life. Indeed, the book begins with the meeting of these two young people in 1927, when both were twenty-two years old; they were introduced by Clifton Fadiman and his wife, and married in 1929. The Trillings' family backgrounds are not scanted or minimized, but this is quite specifically the story of a marriage. The complex histories that had gone into the making of these two young people before they met were merely preparation for the journey. Their "straight way" was lost soon after the journey began: Diana became very ill with hyperthyroidism, and with psychological afflictions of fear and panic. Lionel, generally healthy until his final illness, pancreatic cancer, was psychologically troubled all his life, and would suffer from depressions, unfulfilled literary ambitions, and a perpetual hunger for "real life." The Depression, their parents' financial reverses, radical politics, psychoanalysis, the intellectuals of New York in the thirties, the academic politics Lionel encountered at Columbia—it was of such demons that their Inferno was made.

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Diana Trilling entered a new world when she married Lionel. The friends, the books, the mental virtuosity all fascinated her.

> Over a long lifetime, we loved each other very much, increasingly with the years, although in middle life we quarreled a great deal and often threatened each other with divorce. But even at our angriest, we were never estranged. We never stopped talking with entire intimacy and there was never a time or situation in which we could not trust and count on each other. I have never met any man to whom I would rather have been married.

Throughout their many years together they shared most of their interests and their experiences. Her career in art history which she pursued at Radcliffe, seems to have disappeared when she married; at least, she never speaks of art as a continuing interest, she never refers to galleries and museums, she evinces no opinions on the changes in modernist art and the art world which occurred during the years of her marriage. Music may have been more easily shared, although the career as a professional singer which she hoped to pursue became impossible with her illness. Tennis was an intense preoccupation for many years, but she does not speak about theater or films or dance.

The world Diana Trilling was most aware of was the world of radical intellectuals, mainly Jewish and left-wing, and its politics. Not even the academic community of Columbia occupied her attentions quite so much. She does not seem to have been interested in non-Jewish and non-New York intellectuals and writers such as, for example, R.P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, or Marianne Moore or other contemporaries, or William Empson, I.A. Richards, or F.R. Leavis. European intellectuals seem not to have existed. Even the new movements of thought at other universities are ignored. Politics meant argument, defection, betrayal and conversion, not poll-watching or serving on a municipal council or campaigning for elective office. The Colloquium at Columbia, in which Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun taught, is referred to with awe and reverence, as if no such seminars in classical texts were conducted anywhere else. What of the ferment about Great Books, St. John's College at Annapolis, Hutchins at the University of Chicago, and Meiklejohn at Wisconsin? And what of other advanced educational ideas developed during that time at colleges like Reed, Bennington, Antioch, Sarah Lawrence, and Black Mountain? But if anyone in the Trillings' world knew about such ideas in the world outside Morningside Heights in those days, Mrs. Trilling does not indicate it. Indeed there is something parochial about the life she evokes. As if aware of the closeness of it, she herself refers to "our little parish."

Much has changed in the past twenty years in literature and politics. New kinds of art, of literary thought, new political developments, new generations, in fact, proliferate throughout the cultural space. Mrs.

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Trilling does not discuss mice, apples, bytes, memory, windows, DOS, ROM, or any of the contemporary paraphernalia of the intellectual life. This book does not speak of Derrida, of Foucault, of Lévi-Strauss, nor Lacan, despite the author's interest in psychoanalysis, nor Lyotard or Bourdieu, and despite the author's interest in feminism and women writers she does not talk about Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, or Julia Kristeva. Younger readers whose daily fare includes an intense preoccupation with these writers, and with the problems they propose in life and literature, may not appreciate the conditions Mrs. Trilling evokes, neither the accommodations nor the achievements. But she does not speak of patriarchy or of role models, she does not discuss herself as "a subject" or "an object." And, although she asserts an interest in "the adversary culture," to use Lionel Trilling's famous phrase from *The Opposing Self*, it was the adversary culture as conceived of in the fifties and sixties, not the somewhat different idea of "the transgressive" which is so much more familiar nowadays. There is a difference not only in vocabulary or in emphasis, but the perceived phenomena themselves are not the same; life itself, politics, the economy, the demography of these issues, all differ from the intense arguments, oppositions, and dialogues of earlier years.

Mrs. Trilling was very much a young woman of the twenties, who had the right to vote, the right to drink and smoke and to pursue an education, to work, even to have opinions and love affairs, an heiress of the first feminist revolution. She did not struggle for "women's rights" because it was believed that women had won their rights. But she did not give herself over to serving a husband's life, and career—like Mme. Matisse providing lunch daily on a table facing the sea, or Mme. Cézanne obeying the command to sit as quietly as an apple. Nor was she like the innumerable wives and companions of the "great men" of her own time who required attention, comfort, adulation, and conveniently-run households. She was herself a person of goals, a woman of ideas and opinions and desires. At the same time she was no George Eliot, with a companion who did everything for her, or a Colette. Despite her protracted illness, she does not seem like Virginia Woolf attended by Leonard Woolf who was as much doctor, nurse, therapist, guardian, and manager as he was husband. Mrs. Trilling constructed a different life for herself alongside her gifted and difficult husband, and in a milieu where the apparent liberality of thought and behaviour still did not really acknowledge women. Sometimes it was the women themselves who were the chief culprits in this: Mrs. Trilling recalls wryly how the celebrated women of the *Partisan Review* circle, such as Mary McCarthy or Hannah Arendt, would rudely ignore her, especially if they were attracted to her husband—a familiar experience for wives of intelligence and spirit, and not only in the thirties and forties. Now opportunities and possibilities have increased. Since the twenties there are more educated women, working women, more advanced and enlightened

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women, more women with careers of their own. Younger women and men may not quite grasp the reality of Diana Trilling's situation in the thirties and forties, and may need to be reminded of the disabilities which attended someone like that, no matter how advanced and enlightened she may have been.

Nowadays, "relationships" are more easily begun, and more easily ended. Even the very idea of marriage has been attenuated from the profound affinity it represented for Diana and Lionel Trilling when they were young. There was an idealism then about personal relationships that could be traced to D.H. Lawrence (whose work Diana Trilling edited in a Viking Portable), and before that to a cluster of sentiments linked with "new thought" and the social idealism of the 1890s and the years before the First World War:

> To live with Lionel was to have at my side someone with whom I could share every thought, even the most trivial. The miracle of marriage, if it works, is that it makes you the most important person in the world for at least one other person. Your well-being, your desires and frustrations, your amusements or disappointments matter to your marital partner as they can never matter to anyone else in your grown universe. The miracle of Lionel's and my marriage was that this companionship transcended the frustrations and emotional problems and angers which otherwise might have engulfed it. Seventeen years have now passed since Lionel's death, and hour by hour, minute by minute, I still listen for a clock which no longer ticks.

Is it any wonder that she calls this marriage "the beginning of the journey"?

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TOM WILHELMUS

Contingency

LAST YEAR IN *THE VOLCANO LOVER*, Susan Sontag described history as a kind of flea market where the leftovers of the past become found objects for a person collecting materials for her own creation. The items she inherits from the past are random and include not only objects but also ideas, artifacts, and codes. What she does with them is equally the product of accident and the consequences of her own immediate need.

Today, "contingency," the buzz word for this view of history, is at the heart of some of our most considered explanations about why things are as they are and how they got that way. "The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson," says Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, "suggests that . . . *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—[i]s a product of time and chance." "I am not speaking of randomness," says natural historian Stephen Jay Gould in *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, "but of the central principle of all history—*contingency*," the view that, "A historical explanation does not rest on direct deductions from laws of nature, but on an unpredictable sequence of antecedent states, where any major change in any step of the sequence would have altered the final result."

The significance of such a concept for writers and readers of fiction cannot be encompassed in a single essay, but the wonderful thing for literature is that it holds out the possibility of a more open and fluid view of truth, one which makes the kind of things creative writers do more consistent with how life is, mixing fact, fiction, and happenstance, the products of culture, but also individual need and desire. Reflecting his own admiration for the ability of narrative artists to capture his view of life, Gould named his work *Wonderful Life* because his outlook was shaped by Frank Capra's movie. And Rorty, a philosopher, has endeared himself to novelists, in preference to metaphysicians, with statements like the following: "So the lesson I draw . . . is that novels are a safer medium than theory for expressing one's recognition of the relativity and contingency of authority figures. For novels are usually about people—things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies."

Today, because of this web, both writing and reading are more complex activities. Standards are more fluid. Writers represent a

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greater variety of backgrounds and viewpoints. Readers are more individualized in their tastes and judgments. To sense the degree to which contingency may have shaped the manner in which some contemporary writers create fiction, one might look at Iain Sinclair's *Downriver (Or, the Vessels of Wrath), A Narrative in Twelve Tales*,[1] a book based, among other things, upon a narrative constructed out of a series of postcards, randomly selected, all bearing photographs from the British colonial era.

Principally *Downriver* is a meandering exploration of today's communities along the Thames within and near London and the conditions which gave rise to them, including the history of British imperialism as well as Thatcherite "energy without soul," both of which have turned the dockside areas into a sad mixture not only of poverty, drugs, racial and religious strife but also trendy shops, cafes and opportunities for gentrification. The neighborhoods are, as Americans would say, "mixed" and include not only the poor, disadvantaged, and socially and racially marginal but also haplessly fashionable, upwardly mobile young professionals. A measure of their character is that they are full of exotic "locations" for documentary filmmakers.

History can "explain" such circumstances; theory cannot since only contingency can account for such haphazardness. What's interesting about Sinclair's representation, therefore, is the degree of randomness he is willing to let into his novel. "Joblard's HEART OF DARKNESS," which is the name Sinclair gives to the random selection of cards which organizes *Downriver*, is interesting because, however arranged, they would have served equally well as a basis for narrative. In fact, they create a plan whose pattern is patently and appropriately aimless. Yet the allusion to Conrad's novella raises a whole series of questions about the manner in which history, however arbitrarily, has created the circumstances he describes.

The river Thames, its very mud, no less its buildings, its people, and the cultural artifacts it has yielded, constitute a rich tide in which who-knows-what floats to the surface. Novelists and poets are part of this tide. So snatches not only of Conrad and Eliot, but also a dozen other earlier writers float next to other writers who seem especially adept at documenting the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary life, especially Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Michael Moorcock, and William S. Burroughs, perhaps also Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis as well. Literary allusions combine in turn with the history of the hulks and transports and with tours through buildings and neighborhoods once built from the riches accumulated through the subjection of brown-skinned people and now just as liable to be inhabited by them. Sinclair, who has been "a rare-book dealer, a

[1] DOWNRIVER (Or, The Vessels of Wrath), A Narrative of Twelve Tales, by *Iain Sinclair*. Random House. $23.00.

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filmmaker, a gardener, a brewer, and a dockworker, as well as a poet and critic," seems no less to embody the randomness he describes.

All this is very well, and an interesting conception of the randomness that is apt to occur in any situation and exert an effect upon the times. Stylistically, too, his book is a challenging mixture of autobiographical confession and fantasy. The "I" who speaks has suspicious traits in common with the author. But turn the page and a vintage, sepia-colored photograph becomes the means to create a nurse-cum-prostitute and stripper named Edith who has, in the life of the novel, as much reality as the speaker himself. These things aside, however, Sinclair may also have identified one of the drawbacks of the randomness in postmodern fiction (I have a similar feeling about Rushdie) in that his prose is both so challenging and such a bore. Luxuriant, flat, scatological (like Burroughs), seedy, occasionally funny but more often trailing off into irrelevance, it is a style which in simpler times might constitute a grandiose failure. On the other hand, when randomness is the point, we may need to grant the artist some leeway. Stephen Dedalus on Sandymount Strand is no less irritating and his vision of contingency not that different.

Boredom on the other hand is never the problem in *The Wrestler's Cruel Study*,[2] another postmodernist fiction by Stephen Dobyns, which is full of dramatic energy despite the fact that its themes are both recondite and philosophical, mixing high meaning with devilish comedy and low farce.

One of contemporary America's most interesting writers, Dobyns—author of seven books of poetry and fifteen novels—is also a great chronicler of urban chaos, violence, ethnic, racial, and social diversity, and intellectual fashion. His current novel, set in New York City, is a wild mixture of styles, meanings, and textures structured around the protagonist's search for self-definition and his education into the randomness of modern everyday life.

What if, for instance, the last refuge of the myth of the hero is contained in the cheesy surroundings and cheap dramatizations of pro wrestling? What if, on the other hand, such myth-making has both its rational and religious defenders and Nietzschean redescribers? What if a young, physically beautiful, innocent, and heroic Michael Marmaduke—who in the wrestling arena performs under the moniker "Marduk the Magnificent," destroyer of chaos—undertakes a quest to save his similarly beautiful and innocent girlfriend, Rose White, who has been stolen by gorillas? What if it takes him on a circuitous journey through the night streets and alleys, precincts, boroughs, and even the sewers of New York? And what if the point of this quest is to teach Michael whether God or Nietzsche is more relevant to a discussion of life today?

[2] THE WRESTLER'S CRUEL STUDY, by *Stephen Dobyns*. W.W. Norton. $22.95.

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Michael's manager, Primus Muldoon, an admirer of Nietzsche, claims that identity is an onion without a core. But other characters comprise a grand cabal whose purpose is to initiate Michael into hidden truths based on traditional religion. Much of the hilarity results from Dobyns' depiction of various Manichean and Gnostic doctrines as the reason a series of street gangs are fighting it out in the streets of New York. Crazy as all this sounds, zany, and complex, it is also sinister in a way that readers of Dobyns' earlier novel, *Cold Dog Soup* (1985) will understand. Like *Cold Dog Soup*, this novel is also a night journey through and beneath the streets that is both wild and tacky but which involves a serious look into the abyss as well. Michael's study is cruel because he will lose his innocence and will have to learn to live in a world whose primary quality is its uncertainty.

How contingency may deal with established writers may also be cruel if only because at the flea market of the past readers themselves are in constant flux, redescribing, redefining the value of the trinkets they find as they pass among history's well-stocked tables. Three other recent works by James Dickey, John Hawkes, and Reynolds Price illustrate how contingency plays unexpected games in considerations of some of our most respected literary figures.

For example, the book jacket for Dickey's new novel, *To the White Sea*,[3] argues that it is "pure James Dickey: a transcendent meditation on one man facing desperate odds," a statement meant, I suppose, to remind us of Dickey's former success, *Deliverance*, and to reaffirm his place in the iron man tradition in American fiction. Yet while the facts of the novel may invite such comparisons, today we can hardly countenance the type of viewpoint it might take to read it that way.

The first-person narrator of Dickey's novel is an American gunner who parachutes into Tokyo near the end of World War II on the night before the great firebombing raid on that city. On the day of the raid, he escapes from the city arriving at a plan of fleeing further and further north into country where he feels he, a native of Alaska, has a chance to survive. All the elements of the code are intact—the narrator's conviction that violent death or mutilation is the final arbiter of what is important, heroic cunning, ritualized preparation to do battle, rejection of human society, primitive self-reliance, a fascination with weaponry, brutalization of women, all play their part.

At the same time, however, not even Dickey suggests that we ought to admire this outlook. Much as Clint Eastwood's movie *Unforgiven* questions the mythology of the Western, *To the White Sea* gives us few reasons to believe that the narrator is anything but a psychopath. Not only does he kill too often and too easily but also the very traits from his past which, until the end, assist in his survival seem distorted. He may even have killed a woman before he went to war. Moreover, as he

[3] TO THE WHITE SEA, by *James Dickey*. Houghton Mifflin. $22.95.

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goes further and further north he becomes more and more primitive: his identification is no longer with people, not even with himself as a person, and his thinking grows ever more totemistic. Even on the northern island when he encounters a truly primitive tribe who knows nothing of the war and who treats him with apparent kindness, he rejects them while committing a gratuitous act of mayhem.

In any case what is billed as an "odyssey of self-discovery and an exploration of the primal nature of war and man" turns out to be none of these things—but rather a work which by today's standards is brutal, chauvinistic, sexist, and sadistic—the death rattle of the iron man tradition or an ironic throwback when seen in the context of other contingencies today. To his credit, Dickey appears to demythologize as he mythologizes and leaves room for readers to make judgments of just this sort.

"Strong writers" find ways of reinventing themselves, and another case in point is John Hawkes, whose fourteenth novel, *Sweet William*,[4] is the creation of a master.

Yes, the narrator of Hawkes's novel, Sweet William himself, is a horse. That observation aside, however, the compression of a complete biography into the lifespan of a four-legged creature, is both a totally humane affair and one which opens surprising insights onto the demonic. Given the nobility of his birth as a thoroughbred, Sweet William is a beast whose breeding creates noble expectations—all, however, destroyed in the terrifying circumstances of his mother's death.

I had, in fact, the privilege of hearing Hawkes read this opening chapter and overheard the outrage of another listener, a breeder of horses, for whom the experience of hearing about the death of this "noble dam" was simply too painful to endure. "If you had ever owned horses," she said, "you could not write like that." To which Hawkes, with every kindness, replied, "I do. I can."

Similar moments occur in every chapter of this extraordinary novel illustrating the rage, the passion, and self-conceit that drives a noble creature's life albeit among circumstances that are ultimately tragic, ultimately pointless and contingent. Sweet William's is no average life: its "once-ness" is too important to be merely an average. Hawkes makes us feel this uniqueness in every act (including a gelding) perpetrated on his life up to and including its ending.

In every regard, *Sweet William* is a ruthlessly passionate, savagely imagined eulogy for a being whose identity refuses to be simply a horse. Ultimately, the novel challenges the safe conceptualization by which we judge not only the creatures we use but our own lives as well. Darwin argued that all creatures have equal status in the struggle to survive, that evolution was no ladder "upward" to perfection in the

[4] SWEET WILLIAM, by *John Hawkes*. Simon & Schuster. $20.00.

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merely human. And although this is no environmentalist novel, the message the "Distant sounds and long shadows [that] swim inside [Sweet William's] head" create in us are more relevant to life than any provided by the bumbling human beings who inhabit the novel. No wonder Sweet William is a misanthrope!

Next, in the introduction to his new volume, *The Collected Stories*,[5] Reynolds Price reminds us of the storyteller's attempt to construct a self out of the contingent materials he is given, and he acknowledges the fact that that self is constantly disintegrating and reintegrating, even in a collection intended to give shape to a lifetime. Stories, better than novels, he declares, "show a writer's preoccupations," though "To sort old stories is to meet old selves, lost or long-since abandoned." Each new ordering is nonetheless a new self in some respects, a fact implicit in his abandoning his stories' former chronology in favor of a pattern "which attempts an alternation of voices, echoes, lengths and concerns that would prove unlikely if I held to the order of prior volumes."

What kind of self is it that he chooses to portray? What lends significance and meaning to a collection that spans a career of some thirty years and more?

The first thing one might say is that there is surprisingly little variation either in style or content in stories from the earliest to the latest. We say that Price is a Southern writer, but it might make as much sense to say that he is a writer about the mysteries of adolescent sex, spousal suicide, racial blindness, or intuitions of religious conviction in an age of doubt.

He is aware of history, but primarily it is family history. World events play only a small role in these 50 stories. Many are devoted to self-understanding, but the self in relationship to a close circle of family or friends. Conflicts center upon things that disrupt that circle—puberty, the death of old people, the threatening but seductive appearance of strangers, a reluctant lover, infidelity, and suicide. It might be instructive to count the number of stories involving twelve-year-old boys among these fictions or the number of deathbed reminiscences by old people of things that took place in their youth. The tone in practically all these stories is hopeful, pitying, or forgiving. They contain little irony or wit and seldom flirt with the abyss. They are in more than one sense devotional and move us along on the rich current of Price's calm, resonant prose. Reading Reynolds Price in this collection, one thinks of long-held truths and life's perpetual complications and their resolution, of the desire for tradition, and of the calm ship, not the approaching hurricane. But among contemporary writers, his is only one voice (though a powerful and

[5] THE COLLECTED STORIES, by *Reynolds Price*. Atheneum. $25.00.

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attractive one), and it's hard to believe that other, more disruptive voices, and the hurricane, aren't ready to arrive.

Finally, the most highly-evolved voice of all from among those in this selection, Mary Gordon writes a kind of prose suitable to address the complications and contingencies life has to offer in the 1980s and 1990s—as presented in her recent collection of three novellas entitled *The Rest of Life*.[6]

I know that the reviewer in the *New York Times Book Review* said that in this volume Gordon had presented three women protagonists whose apparent timidity and dependence on men challenged the assumptions of the feminist enterprise. That may be true, but the stories strike me as polemical only in the sense that they present a picture of what it takes for an individual, albeit an individual woman, to adjust and survive in current circumstances and conditions. Each of the women is cautious. Each, it seems to me, knows about the hazards to mental and emotional security that experience provides. Each, however, seems also to hunger for a kind of self-understanding not necessarily identified with getting or keeping a man.

Structurally, I would say these novellas strive to represent states of understanding rather than outward conflict. In "Immaculate Man," a woman has an affair with a priest with whom she runs a shelter for battered women. Although obsessed with the possibility that he might turn to other women, she is wiser than he is, initiated, unprotected by innocence or the worship of helpless femininity which shapes his thinking. Virtually plotless, returning again and again to the same themes, the story is an extended and deepening meditation, however apparently static. This distrust of story *as event* comes through in a brief exchange between the woman and her lover in which she argues that once she nearly let her daughter drown, a story she must continually return to "in case," she says, "it's the one thing about myself that's most important, the truest thing." He, however, claims that because the story is inconclusive and the daughter didn't drown she should read nothing into it.

> "No [he says]. The story didn't end. You don't know if it was you."
> "If the story ended [she says], someone would be dead."
> "Or saved. . . . "

For him, in other words, stories must be conclusive and must be consequential on some larger stage where people may be dead, "Or saved."

The distinction is crucial. Either stories are tools, suitable to state and restate our adjustment to the hazardous and haphazard enterprise of living, or they are calls to arms to grasp for ultimate states of being and truth. In each of the three novellas, men are in a sense

[6] THE REST OF LIFE, by *Mary Gordon*. Viking. $22.00.

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"immaculate" in subscribing innocently to the latter point of view. In the second story, "Living at Home," the narrator lives in terror of losing her lover, a journalist who covers wars and pestilence in third world countries, making him vulnerable to accidental death. And he, too, is frightened though he fails to comprehend it as well or as honestly as she does.

In the final story, too, the one that gives the collection its name, a woman in her late seventies revisits her homeland in Italy after an absence of 63 years, sent away because at fifteen she had entered a suicide pact with a boy of sixteen who had been her lover, and had refused to die with him. The shame—but shame of what?—had caused her father to reject her and send her to the United States where she had lived ever since. The boy, her lover, had been a brilliant student, a poet, to whom the ultimate test was to convince himself—and her—of the desirability of death. Her father, a famous academic, saw only his dream of what was important. In the end, however, the woman realizes that life is not just one story, one dream, one ultimate set of consequences, dictated in the stories sanctioned by a man. And at the end she concludes: "All the different stories. All the different ways it could have happened, each of them [is] true."

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ALAN DAVIS

Unseen Guests

I SPENT SIX WEEKS THIS PAST SUMMER IN BALI and Java on a Fulbright tour with a group of Minnesota artists and educators. In Indonesia, I heard a story which became emblematic for me this fall as I decided upon, and then thought about, the books included here. Although the story as it was told had to do with the performers of the *wayang kulit* (or shadow-puppet play), it speaks volumes about the place of fiction in our lives. In the *wayang kulit*, the *dalaan*, or puppetmaster, manipulates two-dimensional leather puppets (figures from the Ramayana, an epic of later Hinduism) before a translucent screen illuminated by a flame or a bare electric bulb. As the *dalaan* (accompanied by the percussive instruments of a gamelan orchestra) provides a narrative, multiple voices and sound effects (with a gong attached to his left foot), the brunt of the audience sits before the screen and participates imaginatively in the play of shadow-figures on the screen. The performances usually take place at night, of course, when the shadows of the leather puppets are vivid, fully-rendered on the screen. (Though performances nowadays are mostly adumbrated for tourists, the *wayang kulit* in its purest form begins at dusk and continues until dawn, by which time the entire saga of Rama, a deified hero and avatar of Vishnu, and of his abducted consort Sita has unfolded.)

There are daylight performances, however, and at such times, often enough, the *dalaan* and the gamelan musicians are present, but there are no spectators, despite the lure of the gamelan and the puppets, which are beautifully painted and can be viewed directly, without the imposition of the screen, if the spectator so wishes—an Indonesian version of metafiction. At such times, I was told, when there is no audience present, the performance is for the unseen guests—the invisible ones, the ancestors and deities and demons who, according to the Balinese, are everywhere around us. The spectacle of the shadow-puppet play and that haunting notion of unseen guests have provided me with a metaphor for this casual taxonomy of selected fictions. Whom do we write for, after all, if not such unseen guests? I mean the reader, invisible and implicit until the work is completed; I mean the matrix of literary ancestry which is commonly tagged "the tradition"; and I mean the demons and deities (or whatever you decide to call such entities) who either inhibit us or spur us on, but certainly find life within us when we are doing our best work.

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Silent Passengers, a slim collection of luminous sketches and stories mostly about fathers and their progeny, is Larry Woiwode's tenth book.[1] I was immediately drawn to it because he lives in, and often writes of, North Dakota, whose border is a short walk from my front steps; because the gravitas of his best work is always grounded in workaday detail and a strong sense of place; and because the title of this latest collection intrigued me. The title story, in fact, which was included in *The Best American Short Stories, 1993* (edited by former Dakotan Louise Erdrich), is a beautiful and frightening evocation of a father's helplessness when his son James, who "wasn't a do-gooder or tattletale: more a conscience," suffers a closed-head injury in a riding accident. He comes out of a near-death coma not quite able to walk and completely mute. The story, tender and courtly, climaxes in the penultimate paragraph when James, who is recovering quickly, his parents merely "borne along by it, silent passengers, aware only of the movement of time overhead," approaches the horses, the instigators of his calamity, in the far field. He touches them deftly, so that Steiner, his father, who earlier "had imagined taking a 30.30 . . . and dropping the rogue Apache", manages "a glimpse of the son who had always had a way with pardon." Like "Owen's Father," in which a son finds himself by living with the memory of his long-dead father (a probable suicide), or like "Blindness," in which a man momentarily blind comes to see "that his daughter was the only one he could give himself over to in entire trust," the title story is entirely secular and yet entirely infused with belief. "He had always wondered how parents with injured or diminished children were able to bear it. . . . but now he understood; it was enough to have the child with them, alive." A few of the pieces here are sketches, at home in the collection but not complete on their own; in the fully-rendered fictions, however, it is enough to have the shadow-puppet screen, to participate in the drama with a sense of wonder and with gratitude. The characters in Woiwode's stories are people I might very well come across when I go down to the local supermarket for a half-gallon of milk.

Not so in "The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne," the best (and by far the longest) of the three novellas which comprise *Little Kingdoms,* Steven Millhauser's sixth book.[2] By now, after such books as *In the Penny Arcade* and *The Barnum Museum,* his modus operandi is clear. His characters are convincing enough emotionally and his fiction is packed with ordinary detail, but his fictional premises and occasions are meant to remind us continually that we are in a subtle, fabulistic world. His puppets are visible in all of their elaborate, touching beauty; we are simultaneously watching the screen and walking behind it (a double perspective, by the way, which some Indonesian *dalaans* encourage spectators to experience; the danger

[1] SILENT PASSENGERS, by *Larry Woiwode.* Atheneum. $18.00.
[2] LITTLE KINGDOMS, by *Steven Millhauser.* Poseidon Press. $21.00.

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inherent in reading the world literally is one of the themes of the Ramayana). In the title novella, J. Franklin Payne is a Milquetoast in his domestic and professional relations. In his attic study, however, he draws panels for animated cartoons and comes to experience "the revelation of an immense secret life."

In this fable of the creative life, set at the dawn of the age of movies, Payne is a kind of genius, a workaholic who misses out on opportunities to convert his art into profit and finally loses even his wife to the worldly appetites of others. Even as his life falls apart, he can always manage "to escape from the constriction of physical things into a world entirely of his own devising." For him, "excitement was always in the sudden emergence of life from the whiteness of the paper." As you can see, Millhauser has a wonderful ear, the ear of a poet, and he sustains both his style and the narrative's double perspective, juxtaposing the disordered travails of ordinary life, whose degree of uncertainty almost always surprises us, to the transcendent process of belief which results in the artifact. "Voyage to the Dark Side of the Moon" is J. Franklin Payne's masterpiece, reclaimed from commercial interests and screened in his attic. Magically, his wife shows up, and her lover (Franklin's best friend) and his parents—unseen guests made visible by the magic of fiction. That is, the novella crescendos by making explicit the momentary god-like enchantment achieved by any true artist: "And it was good: he had done what he set out to do. Perhaps he could rest now, for he was very tired." Millhauser splits the frame, so that we can watch simultaneously both the shadow-puppets and the puppetmaster; he allows the "divinely superfluous" shapes of art, as Robinson Jeffers put it, to convince us of their reality, but he also engages in a process of demystification that is modulated and classic, like the *wayang kulit,* rather than righteous and postmodern.

Kate Wheeler, on the other hand, in *Not Where I Started From,* a first collection of stories, is more straightforwardly realistic about the shadow-play of illusion and reality, in part because she does not have Millhauser's experience, but mostly because a number of her characters are out front spiritual pilgrims—in Thailand, India and elsewhere.[3] Wheeler, who was ordained as a Buddhist nun in Burma and has travelled extensively in Europe and Asia, is at her best when either her locales or her characters are exotic. She is good, that is, at making the strange ordinary. A story closer to home, like "Judgment," set in rural Kansas and concerning a young woman married to her late mother's lover, a lech who "wants to be buried with the body of a twelve-year-old girl," is powerfully funny in spots but also derivative, the work of a brilliant mimic who has not quite found her voice. But in stories as different as "Under the Roof" (set in Bangkok), "Mani-

[3] NOT WHERE I STARTED FROM, by *Kate Wheeler.* Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.

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karnika" (set in India), and "Ringworm" (set in Burma), Wheeler has an authority all her own. Such stories (mostly, but not exclusively, as you will see, about women) chronicle encounters between Westerners and Asians. In "Under the Roof," for example, a mature and carefully-choreographed comedy of manners, an American male monk, "in intensive meditation for three years, completing two levels of insight practice and the concentrations on the four heavenly abodes," is stranded with Miss Bi Chin, a patron of all things monkish who, the monk sees, can "glow like a smooth golden cat." The monk, naive and struck with his own spiritual growth, even so understands that he "will have to be careful to see her as his older sister, or even as a future corpse." Needless to say, things do not work out as planned, and several complications later Wheeler has dramatized how human weakness manages almost always either to temper the fervor of absolute belief or to reveal ironically how human frailty, fortunately, will have its way with precept and ideology. She manages to use Buddhism, that is, in the way that J.F. Powers uses his Catholicism; there are good Buddhists in her stories, as there are good priests in Powers, but there is no hagiography, only convincing depictions of authentic gurus, bogus self-styled gurus and pilgrims—confused people searching for peace of mind and touching us.

The Ramayana provides role models good and bad and a code of conduct for the Balinese—they know its characters by heart. Acted out by shadow-puppets in village pavilions or by the live dancers of the Ramayana Ballet troupes in the shadows of ancient Hindu temples, it takes on a cultural life of its own which is both fictional and quasi-historical. In our society, we have mostly lost such common codes of reference, to the point where many students at the Midwestern state university where I teach have never heard of Mother Goose, say, much less Henry James or Carl Jung or even Freud. Our role models are always provisional and embattled, and we are forever making up new stories to simulate or mimic belief, so it is a guilty pleasure to come upon a novel which convincingly fictionalizes "real" people who have historical and literary weight. Carol de Chillis Hill's fourth book, *Henry James' Midnight Song,* is set in a fin-de-siècle Vienna where high culture dances cheek-to-cheek with anti-Semitism and where the murder or suicide of a number of women has become a public concern.[4] The novel is a marvelous entertainment, an intellectual shell game and a murder mystery whose suspects include James, Jung, and Freud (among others), and whose solution hinges on an unraveling of psychoanalytical theory. After a body is found in Freud's study by his wife and sister-in-law, and then disappears, leaving behind a bloodstain, the eminent Police Inspector LeBlanc arrives from Paris to investigate. It is he who drives the plot. Freud

[4] HENRY JAMES' MIDNIGHT SONG, by *Carol de Chellis Hill.* Poseidon Press. $23.00.

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insists there was no body, only hysteria, but Hill has a grand time shuffling shells. Edith Wharton, who has discovered physical passion late in life, is "hiding an affair and something more." Henry James, who is Freud's patient for a time, is "hiding guilt over a woman in Venice" who committed suicide and over a cat he murdered. Jung is "hiding his seduction of his patient Sabina and his wish to discredit Freud. . . ." And Freud, most significantly, is "hiding Fliess' mistake on Emma Eckstein's nose and possibly something more." That incriminating bloodstain in Freud's study, of course, turns out to be from poor Emma's nose; I will not spoil the book by saying more, and anyway it would take up too much space to summarize Hill's clever plot twists or the cultural and psychological conundrums she assigns to characters both "real" and unreal.

I usually shy away from such projects, which can be gimmicky and too thinly revisionist, turning "real" people into straw dogs or caricatures, but this is a splendid tour de force, as satisfying in its way as *Ragtime*. Like Doctorow, Hill occasionally seems to have an ideological agenda, but, again like the older author, she only occasionally lets it get in the way of a good story. It's great fun to see Freud and Wharton and James (commingling with the Mains, archetypal Jamesian Americans in Europe, and with the Inspector, among many others) brought to life vividly, everyone "trying to work it out in words."

In Madison Smartt Bell's *Save Me, Joe Louis*, his ninth book in a ten-year career, everyone is trying to work it out with intimidation, baseball bats and handguns, and that's just for starters.[5] This is old-fashioned flat-out underbelly-of-life fiction—no screens, we are meant to feel, no puppets, just real life in all of its documentary rawness. I've admired Bell's work since his first gritty book, *The Washington Square Ensemble*, and reviewed a good deal of it anonymously for *Kirkus Reviews;* prolific and prodigiously talented, he is mostly interested in chronicling the misadventures of hard-luck antiheroes who, as often as not, dig their own graves on the margins of society in low-rent drug-infested Manhattan or in the blue-collar white-trash South. Since his first novel, which was more zany and jazzy than grim, his tone, especially in longer books such as this one, has been mostly hard-core bleak (which may explain why books so full of gunplay and desperadoes have never been grabbed up by Hollywood, so far as I know). Unfortunately, Bell apparently has such a fear of pruning and shaping his longer novels—he once wrote an essay damning minimalism—that sheer information, the stuff of popular fiction, too often overwhelms the more literary elements of his work. His sense of character and place is always sure-handed, at least, but I've come to prefer the compressed dazzle of his best short fiction

[5] SAVE ME, JOE LOUIS, by *Madison Smartt Bell.* Harcourt Brace. $23.95.

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(collected in *Zero db and Other Stories* and in *Barking Man and Other Stories*).

In *Save Me, Joe Louis,* Bell's project, he says in a press release, is to "show, more realistically than most, how small-time crime really happens—by impulse, clumsily, ill-planned, with little forethought and a lot of risk for both victim and perpetrator." Such motivation goes a long way towards explaining why this baggy novel often reads more like a true-crime study than like fiction. Macrae, a small-time crook with a secret heart of gold, hangs out, to his eventual regret, with Charlie, a psychotic. The two of them waylay yuppie types in New York and force them to withdraw money from cash machines. One thing leads to another: a pimp murders a prostitute friend of Macrae's and our antihero beats the guy to within an inch of his life with a baseball bat. Then it's off to the races: Macrae and Charlie (with Porter, a black ex-con and junkie, in tow) escalate to car theft and armed robbery, flee South, hide out in the country with Lacy, Macrae's ex-girlfriend. After more car chases and gunplay, Macrae, in self-defense, blows Charlie away. Not to worry, though: the violence is preamble to a final look between Lacy and Macrae, who seem to be "seeing each other for the first time in their lives."

That crucial stare between two people is the subject of *School for Pagan Lovers,* by Edmund Keeley, who is best known for his translations of Greek poetry.[6] Unlike Bell, who tacks on at the end of his bruising, problematic novel an image of love and possible redemption, Keeley's book, as Carolyn Kizer points out in a blurb, is "about a modern-day Romeo and Juliet." In the *wayang kulit,* as in the Shakespeare play, audiences are most moved when the lovers are separated by circumstances beyond their control, and must work like crazy to get back together. The result, of course, is usually tragic, but Keeley decides instead to write an elegiac lament for lost youth, using the shadow-screen of memory as a structural device.

If Bell works mostly with primary colors, Keeley uses pastels to achieve his effects. Set in Greece in 1938, the book is a moving account of Hal, an American teenager living in Salonika with his family, whose love affair with Magda, his twenty-year-old Greek/Jewish tutor, blossoms idyllically when they escape to Greek Macedonia. Keeley's depiction of their journey is evocative, but we know that their escape will be short-lived. There are family pressures, for one thing: Magda has run away from the prospect of an arranged marriage. More importantly, we have already seen the Hitler Jugend practicing their drills on the Salonika school grounds. History and circumstance, we know, will have their way with the two lovers.

Magda gets bitten by a dog and needs medical care; the lovers return to their two families, where Magda's aunt puts it most

[6] SCHOOL FOR PAGAN LOVERS, by *Edmund Keeley.* Rutgers University Press. $19.95.

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succinctly: "You believe that you can always choose to do just what your heart wants to do." Well, yes, they do, and of course they're wrong. Neither is quite up to the task: Hal returns nine years after the lovers separate to find Magda married and realistic: "Let's just blame it on the war and leave it at that." Hal, the narrator, reluctantly accepts such sound advice, but he will never be the same:

> I sent a note to the place where she worked telling her that I wouldn't be seeing her again because I was leaving Greece and didn't expect to be coming back soon. I also told her that whether or not I ever found someone else in my life I might love as I had her, I would remember her as the one who had taught me all that was possible and impossible about it in the beginning, and I still couldn't help believing that our beginning was the best there was likely to be.

It's a heartbreaking coda, and one completely earned by what precedes it.

If Keeley makes us feel how history inevitably impinges upon the individual, Bobbie Ann Mason, in *Feather Crowns,* shows how public machinery comes to surround and commandeer a private event which is deemed newsworthy.[7] It is the story of the birth of the first known set of quintuplets in 1900 to Christie Wheeler and her husband in rural Kentucky, at a time when end-of-the-century apocalypse is in the air. The novel is shot through with richness and variousness, and surprised me with its plenitude; Mason has mostly been a miniaturist and is best known for stories like "Shiloh," in which affectless or beaten-down characters survive in the strip-mined contemporary world by making small gestures that propel them forward without much self-knowledge. Here, her plain style serves her well, allowing for an accumulation of social and cultural detail which parallels her heroine's growth from a farm wife into a thoughtful proto-feminist who understands that it is "impossible to tell a life story," when what had happened to her was "so long ago it seemed like a deep secret."

Christie Wheeler is an epic heroine, at least by the standards of Mason's previous fiction; she grows under the burden of notoriety. "I can't even remember all their names, much less tell which one is which," jokes her husband James, sounding like a transplant from a Mason short story. But all five infants die within a few days of one another, and Christie, who has decided that "their deaths did not necessarily mean the story was over, or that the event they foretold had yet occurred," allows the babies to be placed inside a glass case and to be touted as "THE GREATEST WONDER OF NATURE IN THE LAST 500 YEARS" on a nationwide tour billed as an "educa-

[7] FEATHER CROWNS, by *Bobbie Ann Mason.* HarperCollins. $23.00.

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tional series of lectures." In fact, it's a freak show, but Christine travels with the bodies and with James, who is reluctant: "I've got to take care of who's coming after. . . . I ain't got time to worry about who went before." Events have placed a strain upon the marriage, but through the journey Christie not only enlarges herself, by taking "note of what's out here," but she manages finally, along with her husband, to grieve for the "babies in the case on the table, lying there before them, mute observers."

I started out by suggesting that we write our best work for unseen guests who inhabit us whether we invoke them or not. Christie's fictional journey with a freak show is a very American version of the *wayang kulit,* providing, instead of the subtlety of a shadow-screen, a glass case (television?) wherein curiosity-seekers confront grotesque versions of themselves. Mason's heroine, on the other hand, turns inward and finds those "mute observers," in whose presence she transcends a culture based more on exploitation than on achievement, more on celebrity than on community. In our culture, books themselves are increasingly marginalized, though hardly mute, and every book we read travels with us, a passenger invisible to the larger world, if it is compelling enough and if we are worthy enough. Books are the screen where shadow-puppets play, giving meaning and body to our lives, and some books make damn good company. If we're lucky, and blessed by the gods and goddesses, they will inhabit us and shadow us to our graves, though probably not beyond.

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TESS LEWIS

Undone by Doubt

AN ERA'S CULTURAL AND LITERARY SENSITIVITY is inseparable from its sense of history. And, if Nietzsche's observation that "an age's historical sense can be inferred from the way it makes *translations* and attempts to absorb past eras and books" is true, then the recent stream of retranslated classics is all the more heartening in an age dominated by an MTV attention span. Along with retranslations of several Dostoevsky novels by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Joachim Neugroschel's new translation of Kafka's stories—which, one hopes, might restore some meaning to the utterly devalued adjective "Kafkaesque"—and two new versions of Vallejo's *Trilce*, we now have John E. Woods's translation of Thomas Mann's first novel, *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family*.[1]

First published in German in 1901 and translated into English by Helen Lowe-Porter in 1924, *Buddenbrooks* is Thomas Mann's best loved and most widely read novel. In fact, when awarding Mann the Nobel Prize in 1929, one of the committee chairmen, incensed by the "artistic monstrosity" of *The Magic Mountain*, demanded that *Buddenbrooks* be specifically mentioned on the certificate. Through four generations of the Buddenbrook family, Mann's tightly structured novel portrays the dissolution of the gentleman-merchant class in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. Just as the religious, socially and economically conservative, pre-industrial *bürger* was gradually replaced by his more secular, democratic, and entrepreneurial counterpart, the *bourgeois*, so the Buddenbrooks line, weakened by bad teeth and fateful marriages with swindlers and musicians, must cede its prominence in Lübeck to the Hagenströms, men of "liberal and tolerant" natures, who stand on their "own feet, unencumbered by the chains of custom and reverence for the past."

Yet *Buddenbrooks* is more than a portrait of the social and economic effects of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. It also depicts the psychological and spiritual upheaval that accompanies any radical social change. The price of the Buddenbrooks' growing knowledge and self-awareness in their increasingly precarious social position is pervasive doubt. The Consul Johann Buddenbrook, head of the family's second generation, "was probably the first of his

[1] BUDDENBROOKS, by *Thomas Mann*. Trans. by *John E. Woods*. Alfred A. Knopf. $35.00.

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lineage to know and cultivate feelings that were out of the ordinary, more differentiated, alien to his solid middle-class heritage." He no longer takes the "sober and practical outlook" of his forebears for granted, but is prone to metaphysical and ethical speculation. His son Thomas, who must lead the family and the firm through its final stages of decline, is embarrassed by his father's feelings, but his own ambivalence towards his inherited tradition is betrayed by his unusual taste in literature and his fondness for satire and polemics.

The fundamental shift in values experienced by the Buddenbrooks does not shake their conviction that character and fate are inseparable. The conservatism and sense of duty that brought the early generations to prominence just as surely prove the undoing of the later Buddenbrooks. Struggle as the characters might against their flaws and weaknesses, they come to accept their fate as the novel's chain of events leads inexorably to its conclusion.

Buddenbrooks opens in 1835 with a lavish dinner given by the head of the family firm, the elder Johann Buddenbrook, in his sumptuous new house. The first signs of decline appear when old Johann's son, the Consul Johann Buddenbrook, allows his religious scruples to interfere with the firm's best interests. His stepbrother Gotthold, disowned for marrying below his station, is demanding one third of the price paid for the house, which Gotthold considers his rightful share of the inheritance. The Consul's deep commitment to his ideal of Christian charity prevents him from unreservedly advising against giving in to his stepbrother's demands, though he cedes to his father's ruthless, uncompromising business sense with relief.

The Consul dies in 1855 after a tenure of relative prosperity, and his four children take center stage. The eldest son Thomas steers the firm through turbulent economic waters. He becomes increasingly fastidious in dress and manners as the firm's prospects grow more and more hopeless, and his elegant exterior cannot hide the ravages of despair and self-doubt. His brother Christian, a hypochondriac who is unable to join the firm because the nerves "are all too short on the left side," frequents the gentlemen's club and houses of "easy sociability." To the family's horror, he marries a prostitute and adopts her illegitimate children, only to be institutionalized by her once she has claimed a quarter of the firm's remaining value as his inheritance. Letting her sense of family duty override her better instincts, their sister Antonie marries two impostors, losing one dowry and besmirching the family name with her two divorces. Tony is the most engaging and robust character in the novel. Her blind faith in the Buddenbrook name sustains her through her share of misfortune and long after her family has perished. Her sister Clara has inherited the Consul's fanatical religious beliefs and dies the childless wife of a Russian pastor, to whom another quarter of the firm is lost. The Buddenbrook line ends with Thomas' son, Hanno, the musically talented "sensitive latecomer," dead of typhus at fifteen.

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Buddenbrooks is a rich panorama of characters, artistic and philosophical ideas, and historical events over which the spirits of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wagner preside. Through the four decades of the novel's action the cycle of family rituals, of marriages, births, and deaths is punctuated by the revolutions of 1848, the Prussian wars of the 1860s and the German unification of 1871. Yet even the most detailed of plot summaries cannot do justice to the novel's sheer artistry. The almost musical structure of *Buddenbrooks*, based on an intricate web of ideas and leitmotifs—recurring gestures, phrases, and images—creates a dynamic tension between continuity and change, tradition and progress.

In *The Ironic German*, his classic study of Thomas Mann's writing, Erich Heller declared translating Mann's work "an almost heroic literary venture, and its relative success a triumph of devoted labor as well as of sheer substance over the inevitable injuries done to its organic form." Undaunted, Helen Lowe-Porter worked her way through almost all of Thomas Mann's most important works over a span of 36 years. She translated *Doktor Faustus* (1947) despite her belief that it was artistically flawed, but drew the line at *The Black Swan* (*Die Betrogene*, 1953), Mann's late novel about a woman who, dying of cancer, falls in love with a much younger man, refusing to translate it because she did not like it.

Helen Lowe-Porter's achievement is impressive and, despite a number of lapses and mistranslations, she earned the grudging respect of many stringent critics. Less instrusive than Constance Garnett's Dostoevsky translations, Lowe-Porter's work has nonetheless had a profound influence on the reception of Mann's work among English speakers. Her tendency to pass over the emotional content of Mann's language in favor of his writing's more cerebral, abstract elements too often saps the life from these novels of ideas. However, with a writer like Mann, a master stylist able to weave grand philosophical constructs seamlessly into the most naturalist of novels, such objections are inevitable no matter how gifted the translator. A more serious limitation of Lowe-Porter's work is that it has not aged well. Much of the dialogue is stilted, sounding more like a Hollywood B movie script of the 1930s or 1940s than natural speech.

The main weaknesses of Lowe-Porter's translation are clearly revealed in a central passage of the book, when a philosophical illumination temporarily reconciles Thomas Buddenbrook with his approaching death. Her predilection for polysyllabic words that are natural to German speakers but stumbling blocks for English readers, and the lack of sustained rhythm in her prose despite her liberal cutting of unwieldy clauses, turn Mann's description of spiritual illumination into an unduly laborious account of intellectual arm-wrestling. Plagued by self-doubt and aware that he is not living up to his ancestors' standards, Thomas chances upon the second volume of

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Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* and, like Thomas Mann before him, finds in this philosophy a "metaphysical intoxication."

> He had left some pages unread in the beginning of the book, and hurried on, clutching rapidly after the main thesis, reading only this or that section which held his attention. Then he struck on a comprehensive chapter and read it from beginning to end, his lips tightly closed and his brows drawn together with a concentration which had long been strange to him, completely withdrawn from the life around him. The chapter was called "On Death, and its Relation to our Personal Immortality."

Unfortunately this version offers little trace of Thomas Buddenbrook's sense of liberation, of being "inebriated by something so indescribably new, alluring, and full of promise that it reminded him of the first time he had felt the hopes and yearnings of love." Woods, however, captures the echoes of Schopenhauer's grandiose, sweeping prose without sacrificing the freshness and movement of Mann's own style.

> At first he had left many pages unread and swiftly plunged ahead, hurrying unconsciously to find the main point, searching for what was important to him, absorbing only a paragraph here or there that happened to engross him. But then he came across a long chapter that he read from the first word to the last, with his lips tightly closed, his eyebrows pursed, concentrating—his face registering a total, almost death-like look of concentration—oblivious to every trace of life stirring around him. This chapter was entitled: "Concerning Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Essential Nature."

The prosaic chapter title in Woods's version jars the reader back into sobriety, while Lowe-Porter's translation lacks such stylistic disruption.

The translator's difficulties in *Buddenbrooks* are caused primarily by Mann's extraordinarily fine ear for regional dialects and class idioms as well as the carefully modulated balance of irony and reverence with which he portrays the *bürgerliche* world of his forefathers. Dialects simply cannot be translated and Woods has grappled with this difficulty as effectively as Lowe-Porter, though he retains more of the original's humor. Mann's stylistic irony and humor is crucially important to *Buddenbrooks*: without it, the novel would simply be a well-crafted but limited work written late in the European realist tradition. Instead, Mann has used this very tradition to portray the collapse of the society that gave rise to the nineteenth-century realist novel.

Thomas Mann was only twenty-six years old when *Buddenbrooks* was published and had not yet evolved the stylistic virtuosity which he perfected in *Death in Venice*. Continuing to work in traditional forms,

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he gradually extended the challenge implicit in his work beyond social and historical circumstances to the concept of art itself. *Buddenbrooks* presents most of the themes of Mann's later novels *in ovo*: the irreconcilable tension between art and "real life," the Faustian pact of knowledge, the questionable morality of art, and illness as a sign of heightened sensitivity. John Woods is now at work translating *The Magic Mountain*, and readers, tantalized by the early genius of *Buddenbrooks*, will soon be able to rediscover the sophistication of the mature artist.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

Poetry Chronicle

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT WE HAD ENOUGH POETRY ANTHOLOGIES to suit any taste and represent any faction, Eliot Weinberger serves up *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders.*[1] Weinberger's introduction claims that his book serves 1) "as a place to find certain amazing poems"; 2) "as an introduction to the work of this historical moment"; 3) "as an alternative to the existing anthologies"; 4) "as a signpost pointing to the books of the individual poets." All of these are worthwhile, and Weinberger carries out at least the first and fourth functions with some efficiency. I appreciate finding excerpts of Charles Reznikoff's "Holocaust," Langston Hughes's "Montage of a Dream Deferred," and poems by George Oppen, William Bronk, and Muriel Rukeyser. But the success of Weinberger's second and third functions is not such a sure thing. Despite his assertion, most of the poets he has included *are* available in a number of anthologies. Far from being "outsiders," most are part of the accepted canon; many were, and among the living still are, affiliated with academic institutions.

Weinberger's further claim that his book provides "an introduction to the work of this historical moment" also misleads us, for *American Poetry Since 1950* does not have much direct bearing on the poetry of the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. The book *does* present thirty-five poets—Williams, Pound, H. D., and four generations of their "heirs." These include poets associated with the Objectivists, the Beats, Black Mountain, the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance, and Language Poetry, yet excludes poets born after World War II. This restriction, which seems to conflict with the book's title, means that we are really looking at a sampling of American poetry from the first decades of this century through the late sixties. So the reader who hopes to discover the developments in poetry that have taken place in the last thirty-plus years will be disappointed. That reader may very well turn from these pages, as I have, irritated by the fact that at $40.00 this anthology is pricey and unnecessary. If only Marsilio Publishers had directed its considerable production expenses toward publishing three good books of poetry by contemporary writers. Of course, that did not happen, for it would have entailed risk and required real critical judgement.

[1] AMERICAN POETRY SINCE 1950: Innovators & Outsiders, ed. by *Eliot Weinberger*. Marsilio Publishers. $40.00.

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In his introduction to David Ferry's *Gilgamesh,*[2] William L. Moran explains that the author "has given us, not a translation, not at least as that term is ordinarily understood, but a transformation." Working primarily from a seventh century B.C.E. text, itself a Babylonian translation of a much earlier Sumerian original, Ferry attempts to fill in existing gaps in the fragmented story of the troubled ruler of Uruk's quest for companionship, fame and immortality. Ferry's most inspired contribution to the original is his portrayal of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's servant, a Wild Man who is the king's equal in strength and wisdom. Enkidu, a great scene-stealer, carries this version of the story on his hairy back, holding our interest by supplying a vital antidote to Ferry's rather stodgy Gilgamesh. Only after Enkidu dies, punished for the part he plays in killing Huwawa, guardian of the Cedar Forest, does the king appear more dynamic. In grief he becomes more like his lost companion, a transformation that serves him well as he travels to the end of the world to learn the secret of immortality.

If Ferry's version of this timeless story is pleasing in the imaginative bridges he constructs to the existing fragments, and in his interpretation of Enkidu's character, its weakness is in the making of the verse itself. Ferry tends to draw out description, deflating tension and slowing down the pace as he does so. Early in the tale Gilgamesh settles on a plan to tame the Wild Man, sending "a temple prostitute, to conquer him / *with her great power*" (italics mine). The italicized extension isn't necessary; it seems tacked on only to fill out the meter. The same thing occurs after their sexual encounter. Ferry writes: "When this was done *and both of them were clothed . . .*" Though Ferry writes in iambic pentameter, there are many odd violations, as in the clotted "wild bulls locked-horned and staggering, staggered wrestling," or "And the huge mountain fell down on the two of us," where the adjective (huge) is redundant and adds a stress to the line. There are also numerous instances of roughed up syntax, as in "and what I found was a sign telling me to / abandon the journey and what it was I sought for," and repetitive detail: "After a time the oblivion of sleep / poured in upon the king. *He fell asleep*" (italics mine). Again, the poet fills out the line to suit the meter.

The same problems in the verse itself also trouble *Dwelling Places,* Ferry's latest book of poems and translations.[3] As in *Gilgamesh,* iambic pentameter is Ferry's line of choice. But in both books he often violates the meter for unclear reasons and to no good effect. In both he is also overly fond of inverted syntax, beginning with modifiers and suspending verbs to create a kind of modern translationese in imagined, antique cadences. Used in moderation, this is not an

[2] GILGAMESH: A New Rendering in English Verse, by *David Ferry.* The Noonday Press. $10.00p.

[3] DWELLING PLACES, by *David Ferry.* The University of Chicago Press. $20.00; $7.95.

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altogether ineffective device. Unfortunately, Ferry relies on it more heavily than one can stand. The sestina "The Guest Ellen at the Supper for Street People" is a pretty good model of the form, but it stands apart from a series of poems and translations that seems almost willfully oblique in meaning. Often the verse just plods along, its sense summed up by this line from "Committee": "Better not know too much too soon all about it." The author of *Dwelling Places,* freed from the guide of a classic text, doesn't have much to say to me.

Not so with Lynne McMahon in *Devolution of the Nude.*[4] More than many poets writing today, she is capable of witnessing through an historical eye, and facing the moral dilemmas her observations uncover. In "I'm Always Coming Across the South," McMahon rejects her Southern childhood as personified by a racist, overweight neighbor who guzzled Pepsi. Even so, the narrator is able to see that culture's influence in the way she relates to her children, and in the way she sizes up her life and the lives of others. McMahon succeeds here at nothing less than the working out of a difficult moral position. Most poets today would not push this issue so far, preferring to stop at the politically correct rejection of a flawed past. McMahon's nervous, obsessive hunger for answers does not allow her to settle for platitudes. The lovely poem "Hopkins and Whitman" becomes more than a touching homage. McMahon drives to the heart of the connection between the two poets, revealing their preoccupation with death through their repeated references to it from their earliest poems to their last. Her poems "Epilogue" (on the personal aftermath of the landmark Roe vs. Wade case) and "Ann Lee" (on the founder of the Shaker movement) both honor the historical weight of her subjects and burrow beneath history's surface to show us, on very human terms, the consequences of significant acts.

Even without the springboard provided by an historical character or situation, McMahon can be dazzling. "Slammed Door" begins with a sixteen-line sentence, which transforms the jarring occurrence announced by the title into empathy with the personified Outdoors and the house as *feeling* entity. In "Cheap Sunglasses," which begins in a similar way—this time a sentence of fifteen lines—we experience the conventional love poem turned topsy-turvy. This poem showcases McMahon's wit and humor. She can, on occasion, be flippant, as in ". . . the expulsion from the garden was the garment district's / first advertisement ploy," but she can also muster a more sinister sophistication, as in "Barbie's Ferrari," which for the first time made me think of Barbie as a potential dark heroine in a Robinson Jeffers poem.

McMahon's poetry looks deep into the rhythms of the world and discovers there a message of continuity, an acknowledgment of the commerce between generations, the living and the dead:

[4] DEVOLUTION OF THE NUDE, by *Lynne McMahon.* David R. Godine. $12.95p.

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. . . Mirage pulled the wagon
trains toward the horizon
and tugged babies from the darkness.
All the tired souls sucked
into the afterlife were unstrapped
from the travois and lifted up
by its shimmer.
This is still a visionary place . . ."
"Dog Days"

Debt, Mark Levine's first book, is a National Poetry Series Selection for 1992.[5] A graduate of Iowa who currently teaches in Missoula, Levine certainly writes with the frenetic energy celebrated by James Tate and Jorie Graham in the book's jacket copy, but it is difficult, at this point, to say much more. It is difficult because the poems in *Debt* do not add up to the coherent expression of an individual's vision of the world. Too many of them read like classroom exercises, failed attempts at witty, probing asides; too many imitate the poems of our better Surrealists, Charles Simic, George Hitchcock, and Tate himself: "I pull my head from my scissors, I pull / the light bulb from my mouth—" ("Work Song"). These older poets have written nearly the exact same lines, and variations on them, in superior poems throughout their careers. Such echoes appear on almost every page of *Debt,* a fact that endows the book's title with added irony. Though Levine surely imagined a breakthrough style, he has only managed to give us writing for the five-to-ten-second attention span. The principles of composition are those followed by advertising copywriters: Go heavy on buzz words, give a high gloss glimpse—then bounce off of—current events that are hot in the news, and deliver these with an *attitude. Debt*'s attitude is flippant, irreverent, stage-modest, *slick.* I wish I detected some toughness and compassion, too, and a coherent vision of the world harnessing the reckless verbosity.

James McManus' *Great America* resembles *Debt* in intention, but is more successful in execution.[6] McManus is the author of three novels, which has unusual bearing on the matter, for we find ourselves in the company of a novelist-on-a-spree. In fact, rather than poetry *Great America* is really a Day Book, the things one jots down when not writing a novel, when building towards a new one. So in exuberant formlessness McManus writes about his diabetes, Slash Art, and being buffeted about in a 747's bathroom, among other things. The writing is packed with name-dropping of celebrities who, in a rather sorry sense, provide so many emotional points of reference in our days and nights. I mean to say that all too often, when we want to *feel* we emulate the tough Bogart, or romantic Cruise, rather than put in the

[5] DEBT, by *Mark Levine.* William Morrow & Company, Inc. $20.00.
[6] GREAT AMERICA, by *James McManus.* HarperPerennial. $11.00p.

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emotional investment required to make our state of being real rather than an imitation or posturing. McManus sees right through this fact of contemporary life and relentlessly pricks us with its embarrassing absurdity. Appropriately, this writing pays homage to Samuel Beckett. Even so, McManus' primary goal appears to be to have fun. In the parlance of the Saturday night tavern where McManus would feel right at home, *Great America* is a hoot. It says something about the state of the art that the writing in McManus' book is more enjoyable, finally, than a lot of the more *serious* poetry finding its way into print.

One such serious book is *The City of Women* by Sherod Santos.[7] Described on the cover as a sequence of poems and prose, the book hopes to reveal "the under-story" of love and intimate relationships. Santos' attitude toward this project, and his articulation of it, are aggressive and peculiar: "As though by an act of *my* own will I had dominated over its meaning." Not surprisingly, success comes when his preoccupation with control breaks down:

> Our tin house sang through its chronic,
> Sick arguments, the diesel song of bulldozer,
> Steamshovel, grader, and crane.
>
> Part II

If only we met with more phrasing like this. Unfortunately, such moments seem almost accidental among the ponderous lurches toward profundity, the summaries, lists, and prosy chronicles. The engine of verse never jump-starts, never really manages to blast free. Here is Santos describing his deepest revelation about his subject:

> I never tried to untangle her stories, to ferret out their truths and illusions, for I felt I was somehow in sympathy, even, at times, in *complicity,* with what I believed was her actual motive: A desire to sustain that deep-felt, inmost version of our lives—that self projected onto the screen of the self—which new lovers know empowers them (like the character of a thousand poems) and old old lovers know lamentably wanes.

For whatever reason, Santos chooses to express himself in the prose of the journal entry, relying only on italics for intensity, and retreating in the end to the familiar posture of the vague, personal reference to that which it is impossible to express. But poetry, if it means anything at all, must articulate that very mystery. *The City of Women,* however, gives us no depiction of love, and no insight that hasn't been expressed better by others. The mindset that too carefully edits personal experience plagues this volume:

[7] THE CITY OF WOMEN: A Sequence of Poems and Prose, by *Sherod Santos.* W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $18.95.

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> L. arose one morning and began to wash the floors and windows in all the rooms of our rented house. It took her late into the afternoon, and when she finished she sat in a chair and wept out loud, because, as she said, I hadn't even tried to stop her.

Properly prepared for, these lines could have packed a punch at the end of a really good story. But the story's been left out, reducing the lines to bathos. The book concludes in a list of fragments, which seems appropriate. One wonders, at the end, why the concerns of these journal entries were not worked out on the way to writing good poems. The result might have been a book worth publishing.

In the last ten years, Thylias Moss has published four volumes of poetry, a prolific output culminating in *Small Congregations: New and Selected Poems.*[8] Speed, aggression, and the irreverent, challenging snarl of performance drive Moss's poems through religious, historical, and personal landscapes. Her religious attitude is that of the wisecracking, elder daughter assessing a lovable yet grumpy father who is "watching his kids through a window, eager to be proud / of his creation, looking for signs of spring." Her faith, reassuringly traditional, consists of belief in sin, guilt, and penance; or in her own words: "I am now at the age where I must begin to pay / for the way I treated my mother." This unabashed willingness to face up to and confess her own failures serves Moss well in religious meditation, and in her many poems about the African-American experience. "Rush Hour," "A Little Something for Buckwheat and Other Pickaninnies," and "One-Legged Cook" are exceptional short poems combining a tenderness in individual portraiture with a more familiar indictment of conditions that impede economic and social progress. At one point in "Running Out of Choices," a rambling, disturbing chronicle of our century's violence, Moss declares, "Sometimes I want to give reporters a piece of my mind." That impulse—to blow the whistle on hypocrisy—emerges in poem after poem.

Even so, many of the poems in *Small Congregations* are not without blemishes. Moss, like many others, is capable of some very bad writing, and rather more than one wishes to see finds its way into this book. But that is just to say that Moss could stand to become more selective in her self-editing. Having noted this, I return to my admiration for the way Moss survives those moments when her verse turns boorish. Inevitably, she trusts her poem's subject to lift her up and set things right again. The consciousness she writes from is compelling, a sweet, audacious mix of streetwise brawler and social worker. It is a consciousness that wins us over with straight talk and a deep faith in the sorry human animal.

[8] SMALL CONGREGATIONS: New and Selected Poems, by *Thylias Moss*. The Ecco Press. $22.95.

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If I had to select one poem to showcase the very best of Moss's qualities, I would point to "The Day Before Kindergarten: Taluca, Alabama, 1959." In the poem the narrator, a child, and her mother walk into a store for thread:

> Me and Momma go in. The fan
> don't move her hair.
> She keeps her head down, stands
> a long time at the counter.
> Just wants some thread,
> could get it herself,
> there's a basketful beside her.
> Clerk keeps reading.

When the clerk tells them they must leave, the mother hustles the child out the door without a word of protest. The child's father goes into the store next and emerges with a sack—"the clerk thought he was white." All the brutal terms of segregation—the mother's submissiveness and humiliation, the father's deception in getting by, the child as naive victim—find succinct embodiment here. Later, as the store burns down, the family watches from the porch. "Ain't God good!" Mama says. But after the fire the child sees something else; in the smoke she sees what "could be a black man / running down the road." As if to identify with that catalyst of change, the child rubs ashes into her doll's face and her vision of a future breaks through:

> 'cause I ain't scared
> no more
> of nothing.
> Maybe I should be
> but I ain't.

That's the brass that makes Thylias Moss's poems worthwhile.

In a review of James Schuyler's poems several years ago in these pages, Mark Jarman referred to them as poetry "that puts everything in." Now two years after Schuyler's death the beautifully produced *Collected Poems* adds even more weight to Jarman's assessment.[9] Beginning in imitation of William Carlos Williams, evolving into a literary force with John Ashbery and others of the New York School, Schuyler wrote in exhaustive, open detail about food, clothes, friends, country places and the beach, illness and meditation, travel, love, plants, architecture, and the weather. In the vernacular of the postmodern West, one might call Schuyler a *snapshooter.*

"A Picnic Cantata" is indicative of his best effort. This slice-of-life sequence succeeds through ingratiating tone, shrewd and playful

[9] COLLECTED POEMS, by *James Schuyler.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

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placement of rhymes, and dialogue that owes its pacing and strategic eruptions to Beckett, if to anyone. In the end the poem delights, reminding us that delight really *is* a goal of poetry. Other poems, such as "The Trash Book," the sweet elegy for the poet's grandmother, "So Good," and some of the love poems from *The Crystal Lithium,* Schuyler's third volume, demonstrate that his wide open, stubby-lined style can be adapted to shorter poems, too. Only in long, long lines, such as we find in "The Morning of the Poem," which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981, does Schuyler's style seem overbearing. It is fascinating to observe the poet who put in everything actually heap even *more* description and detail into his writing, piling it on until the poem's structure sags, then falls in on itself. The endless prose of the poem makes it unreadable (maybe that's why it *won* the Pulitzer?), a marathon test of endurance. "Hymn to Life" is another example of a failed effort in *long* lines. These two poems may help us formulate a simple truth for the poet who would include everything: Go ahead, but do it in short, snappy lines. For the most part, Schuyler follows this advice.

A final assessment of Schuyler's poetry cannot be complete, however, without more mention of Ashbery. The poems of the two are so similar in their prose, in their rambling skips through disparate references, occasionally even in their cuteness. But in the end, Schuyler appears to have less to explain to himself (and therefore less to justify), and so has more to say to others. He is compelled to make more sense than Ashbery. Schuyler lived and wrote in a period of self-conscious reassessment of art, and the nature of much of his work calls into question the nature of poetry itself. But whether one calls his work *writing* or poetry, one often discovers a *person,* one whose agenda never changes, worth listening to between the lines. "I don't want to be open, / merely to say, to see and say, things / as they are."

The Run of the House by Wyatt Prunty embodies a greater seriousness than is found in most books of contemporary verse.[10] Sophisticated in understatement, formally diverse and elegant, the poems often meditate on objects that share space with us—a tree, monuments, a ferris wheel—exploring mysterious influences that traffic between the animate and inanimate:

> . . . the genius of the wheel was accident,
> The always-almost that hadn't,
> A minor agony rehearsed as fun
> While the lights came up and dark replaced the sun,
> Seeming to complete their going round all day,
> Paying to be turned that way.
>
> "The Ferris Wheel"

[10] THE RUN OF THE HOUSE, by *Wyatt Prunty.* The Johns Hopkins University Press. $30.00; $12.95.

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Most poets concern themselves with stages of development in consciousness or situation. Prunty articulates stages of perception we often speed through, ignore, or miss altogether as we rush from station to station. Hard-earned insight, followed by speech that actually intends to communicate with readers rather than mystify them, intensifies the elegiac poems found here, as in "Letter for the End" (for Howard Nemerov), "Miss Lucy," and the long, poignant "The Taking Down," in which the narrator describes the packing away of Christmas decorations at a hospital by way of exploring the season's impact on both caregivers and the elderly. Prunty often writes with compassionate, honest intelligence about individuals on the margins—the sick and remote, the lonely and forgotten. He is even capable of considering them with surprising levity. The subject of "Elderly Lady Crossing on Green," for example, dreams of freedom as recklessness and speed, how when she was young she "drove a loaded V8 powerglide / And would have run you flat as paint / To make the light . . ." This is hardly the stereotypical senior citizen. Her portrayal, while making us smile, also puts a particular spin on a mix of aggression and self-loathing that is so peculiarly American. In the same vein, the grim humor of "A Note of Thanks" comes at the expense of a vacationing couple contending with stolen credit cards. With just the right tenderness and emotional distance, Prunty zeroes in on their gullibility and denial, their capacity for coming up with ineffectual solutions when confronted with inconvenient problems. And in their failure we discover our well-meaning, comical selves. Poems like these alter the tone and pace of *The Run of the House,* but we are never far from the solitary witness mediating on our place in the cosmos:

> For now, the small plane's red interior
> Of night lights, maps, and instruments
> Powers through two kinds of dark—cities
> That sometimes wake and sometimes are asleep,
> And overhead an older population,
> Orion, Andromeda, Perseus . . .
> Who with their dippers, the lion, bull, and fish
> Arrange our darkened ways for out and back,
> Most accurately and uncaringly so,
> As sometimes to one side the local moon
> Pulls up and pales us with its used light,
> Under which we go, plying our lost and found.
>
> "Flying at Night"

This is a well-developed metaphor for living, and for the writing of poems. Prunty organizes his experience and orchestrates his expression to a polished degree that eludes most of his contemporaries.

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DAVID MASON

West Indian Discoveries

J. EDWARD CHAMBERLIN'S RICH INTRODUCTION to Caribbean poetry in English begins with an appropriate bluntness: "Slavery shaped the West Indies."[1] Immediately we know that this literary historian will not separate aesthetic values from political problems, but will attempt to illuminate them simultaneously. The very first poem he quotes, "Epitaph," by the Jamaican poet Dennis Scott, makes the relationship between history and language harrowingly clear:

> They hanged him on a clement morning, swung
> between the falling sunlight and the women's
> breathing, like a black apostrophe to pain.
> All morning while the children hushed
> their hopscotch joy and the cane kept growing
> he hung there sweet and low.
> At least that's how
> they tell it. It was long ago
> and what can we recall of a dead slave or two
> except that when we punctuate our island tale
> they swing like sighs across the brutal
> sentences, and anger pauses
> till they pass away.

Professor Chamberlin's eloquent commentary finds in this poem the substance and direction of his entire book. In his view, memory and historical suffering are inseparable from the aesthetic choices poets make. He brings his very substantial knowledge to the case, arguing "that West Indian poets are, willy nilly, at the center of a fundamental poetic issue. The tensions between naturalness and artifice, speech and writing, familiarity and strangeness are in theory sources of strength. In practice, however, they can also be sources of stress." By discussing the poetry of a region that is so clearly post-colonial, in which language and power are so frequently part of the same debate, he raises questions of much wider relevance than the scope of his book would at first suggest.

[1] COME BACK TO ME MY LANGUAGE: Poetry and the West Indies, by *J. Edward Chamberlin*. University of Illinois Press. $44.95; $15.95.

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Lately, the distinction between social understanding and aesthetic value has become quite blurry. The fact that Chamberlin has previously written on Oscar Wilde and on the attitudes of whites toward Native Americans suggests that he has frequently revisited questions of politics and poetics. Though his discussion of matters like slavery and black power movements is deeply sympathetic, it is never simplistic. Chamberlin's open, generous survey seems close to the spirit of the leftist critic, C.L.R. James, who once wrote,

> The West Indian writers have discovered the West Indies and West Indians, a people of the middle of our disturbed century, concerned with the discovery of themselves, determined to discover themselves, but without hatred or malice against the foreigner, even the bitter imperialist past.

That may sound too cosy to be true, but the work of Earl Lovelace, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison and others seems to bear it out. The Whitmanesque spirit of inclusiveness underlies most of what Chamberlin has to say, while that great misanthrope, V.S. Naipaul, is the bugaboo of nothingness against whom these writers oppose themselves. Theirs is the story of an evolving post-colonial consciousness. Many of us who are not descendants of slaves can understand the problem of growing up far from cultural centers, feeling displaced and rootless. Chamberlin, a Canadian, also seems to feel that this is a global experience. We're all post-colonial. We're all regional. And we're all trying to discover what that means.

But there are limits to this sociological approach toward literature; Chamberlin seems well aware of them when he writes, "Every poet has two allegiances: one to the facts of local experience, and the other to the formalities of literary expression. To life; and to art." In discussing this divided loyalty, Chamberlin reveals that he is sceptical about any theory of universal forms. When he writes of Bartolemé de las Casas, who so famously opposed slavery in the sixteenth century, he concludes, "Las Casas would probably be accused of 'political correctness' these days, for he argued that we must recognize relativities of meaning and value." There is no denying that what anthropologists call "contact" always displays these relativities in sharp relief. In post-colonial narratives, the heroes of the colonizers become the villains of the colonized (just try extolling Churchill to the Irish). Even thoughtful English men of letters like Carlyle and Trollope left a saddening record of racist remarks. Luckily, Chamberlin's point is not that we should stop reading Carlyle and Trollope because of these serious lapses, but that we should face up to the facts of xenophobia and racism that underlie most intercultural contact from Herodotus on down. His history might have been deepened if he had quoted from slave narratives, such as Olaudah Equiano's 1789 autobiogra-

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phy, but Chamberlin wants us to understand the role of European racism in West Indian conceptions of audience and language, how rebellion against the powers of Babylon (to use the Rastafarian term for the white world) lies at the heart of so much Caribbean poetry.

Perhaps his strongest example of the European inability to see any culture but its own derives from the nineteenth-century historian James Anthony Froude, who wrote, "There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own." We are properly shocked by such statements, but we should not forget that modernists like Eliot and Beckett made similar statements about the "hollowness" of modern Europeans. Naipaul has frequently adopted a similar despair, portraying West Indian politicians as "mimic men." One of the many fascinating facts Chamberlin offers is that the emblem of St. Lucia is a parrot—simultaneously local and suggestive of universal anxieties about identity, a voice that mimics the voices of its owners, worse than a slave because a slave can at least rebel in his or her language. West Indian populism is born of such rebellions—calypso, reggae, ska, dub poetry—rejecting modernist despair for the theatre of a new identity.

Language as identity and rebellion. Chamberlin rightly points out that we have seen this before in Scotland and Ireland. In Nigeria, writers like Chinua Achebe are sometimes criticized for mastering a foreign form, the English novel, and not writing enough in Ibo or other local tongues. The triumph of English in so much of the world has created identity crises. Equiano, the West African ex-slave, wrote a supple English prose designed to please an eighteenth-century London audience, while many of the modern dialect poems quoted by Chamberlin are as difficult for me to understand as the early Scots of Gawin Douglas. Phonetic spelling in dialect can be tough on a reader, whether Shaw's cockney in *Major Barbara,* or the verse of Louise Bennett:

> Me glad fi see yuh come back, bwoy,
> But lawd, yuh let me dung;
> Me shame a yuh so till all a
> Me proudness drop a gung.

Europeans colonized through language as much as by the gun. (In fact, some languages have been preserved by these colonizing efforts, partly in translations of the Bible.) Chamberlin's examples of linguistic colonization are numerous, the following perhaps his most obvious:

> In 1492, when Queen Isabella was proudly presented with the first grammar of Spanish ever written, she asked impatiently, "What is it for?" The answer she got from the Bishop of Seville must have

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> appealed to the woman who sponsored Columbus. "Language is the perfect instrument of empire."

In a modern movie that scene would be played as the epitome of evil. More examples of linguistic coercion range from the Welsh stone and the Irish hedgerow to the Indian boarding schools of North America —all of which represent attempts to eradicate a local language and replace it with an imperial one. At this point Chamberlin's survey shifts, inevitably, to the language theories of twentieth-century Europeans: Saussure, Jakobson, Bakhtin *et al.* His brief discussion of their work is clearly justified and mercifully jargon-free. In order to disarm critics of West Indian populism and dialect poetry, he argues that "The idea of a standard form of the language is a powerful fiction, which among other things represents a hierarchy of prestige and power." In another chapter he quotes Joyce's Stephen Dedalus on the subject:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master,* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

We have reached that point in history when a great many speakers of English in India, Malawi, Nigeria, Kenya, Australia, North America—make your own list—would agree with Stephen Dedalus.

But the loyalties of an artist like Joyce are hard to pin down; he could be as scathing about the Irish as Naipaul is about the Trinidadians. His Gabriel Conroy, taunted as a "West Briton," speaks some of the loveliest English poetry around. In short, English is not the property of England, and this has been true for a very long time. Merely to dismiss what Adrienne Rich once called "the oppressor's language" is no solution—languages are not used only to subdue people—and Chamberlin's shrewdest point comes late in the book when he suggests that the language of "the people" is also a fiction, a sophisticated stylization, like all poetry a negotiation between form and speech. If English has been used as a tool of oppression—and I cannot think of any language on earth that has not—it has also been enriched by the creative energies of those who have been oppressed. Throughout its history, English has proved fabulously absorbent and flexible—a great sponge of a language best represented by the swelling imperial edifice of the O.E.D. The instrument of empire is also the vehicle of poetry.

Despite the mongrel nature of the language, one must still argue that some uses of it are better than others. Chamberlin's ambivalence about linguistic hierarchies leaves him little room for aesthetic judg-

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ment. In the fifth of his six lengthy chapters, he describes the careers of three poets who, he feels, represent the major accomplishments of the region: Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Lorna Goodison. All three poets offer robust versions of poetry's eternal dialogue between life and art, history and forms of expression. Walcott is the most prodigiously talented of the three; Chamberlin frequently refers to the epic poem, *Omeros,* for its post-colonial vision as much as its poetry. Here the weakness of sociological criticism shows. Reviewing *Omeros* in these pages a few years back, I criticized Walcott's conflation of several colonial experiences—West African, Irish and Native American—not because it was intellectually false, but because it distracted from his story. At times he appeared to be writing for an audience of professors in some vast department of multicultural studies. I think Walcott writes better when he limits himself to the local (admittedly, given his annual peregrinations, this is hard to define). Nearly all of his attempts to adopt an international pose ring hollow to me, while his poems of St. Lucian or Trinidadian experience, especially those in dialect, are frequently wonderful.

Brathwaite, on the other hand, has largely been a poet of Negritude, translating his African experience (seven years in Ghana) into poems about West Indian identity. While there are powerful passages in his trilogy, *The Arrivants,* I have found few Brathwaite poems that seem to me truly memorable. When he writes that "the hurricane does not howl in pentameters," I can't see that he has made any sort of argument at all. It confuses or ignores the fact of the poet's divided loyalties to art and to life. My reservations about Brathwaite lead me to difficult questions: What is good poetry? What is it for? How do we know it when we see or hear it? Many critics now believe that all aesthetic values are relative. I simply cannot agree, though I recognize that if we are honest our debate will leave plenty of uncertainty. Chamberlin says that poetry ought to help people live their lives, but he forgets to press for the best poems that give the best help through language that is vivid and precise and memorable.

The third of Chamberlin's triad of major poets is Lorna Goodison, whose work was a revelation to me, much of it beautiful for its simple negotiation of the line between life and art. Here is a poem of hers called "The Mulatta as Penelope":

> Tonight, I'll pull your limbs through
> small soft garments
> your head will part my breasts
> and you will hear a different heartbeat.
> Tonight, we said the real goodbye, he and I
> but this time I will not sit and spin and spin
> the door open to let the madness in.
> Till the sailor finally weary of the sea

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returns with tin souvenirs and a claim to me.
True I returned from the quayside
my eyes full of sand
and his salt-leaving smell
fresh on my hands
but you're my anchor awhile now
and that holds deep.
I'll sit in the sun
and dry my hair
while you sleep.

Poems like this one (I'm quoting from the anthology mentioned below rather than the slightly different version in Chamberlin) make a good case for standard English, or at least for its availability, so we can step outside local experience and speak to many people about the human heart.

I have a few more quibbles with Chamberlin's good book. On page 114 he wrongly suggests that Eliot's ideas about impersonality in poetry came after *The Waste Land* rather than before; on page 244 he quotes Yeats's "Adam's Curse" as though it were prose; and in his thorough bibliography he credits *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* to Paul (rather than Paula) Burnett. If I also feel dissatisfied with his account of aesthetic values, perhaps I reveal my own frustration that so many of the poems in this book are quoted for social understanding, so few for breathtaking lines. I liked what I saw of Lorna Goodison, Dennis Scott, Ian McDonald, David Dabydeen and others, but I wonder why the Jamaican-born Edward Lucie-Smith is not found here. Is he considered a British poet now? His poems "Your Own Place" and "Imperialists in Retirement" would have been fine additions to Chamberlin's discussion, and in "The Wise Child" I find an apt conclusion for my review:

I couldn't wait. My childhood angered me.
It was a sickness time would cure in time,
But clocks were doctors slow to make me well.
I sulked and raged. My parents told me 'play'—
I stood in the garden shouting my own name.
The noise enlarged me. I can hear it still.

At last I've come where then I longed to go.
And what's the change?—I find that I can choose
To wish for where I started. Childhood puts
Its prettiest manners on. I see the dew
Filming the lawn I stamped.

The wise child knows
Not here, not there, the perfect somewhere waits.

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A SELECT **HUDSON REVIEW** PUBLICATION

Poems by Ghalib

translated by
AIJAZ AHMAD
with
WILLIAM STAFFORD
and
ADRIENNE RICH
forenote by
AIJAZ AHMAD

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

In the Autumn issue of your magazine Felix Stefanile makes several unjustified charges concerning the Ecco Press translation of the *Inferno*. Presumably he was a friend of the late John Ciardi, and so it's understandable, though misguided, if Mr. Stefanile chose to attack this new translation for not having acknowledged Ciardi's earlier rendering of the text. Unfortunately, he goes quite a bit farther. Without ever using the word "plagiarism" (and he's well advised not to, since it is a serious charge and might involve him in litigation), he implies that several of the translations are unduly similar to earlier ones. In particular, he asserts that my translations of Cantos XXIX and XXX are stolen from Ciardi's. On what basis? First, that we used the same verse form. He quotes Ciardi on his decision to cast the translation in something Ciardi calls "dummy *terza rima*." But there is no such thing. A poem is in *terza rima* or it isn't. What Ciardi did was to set the poem in tercets, using the rhyme scheme *axa*, a stanza form found in a number of modern lyrics, including Berryman's "The Lightning," Donald Davie's "Barnsley and District," and Danny Abse's "A Winter Visit." My decision to use this stanza was arrived at as follows: I wanted to acknowledge that the original was rhymed, but I didn't think in the time allotted I could provide a version in *terza rima* that would have other indispensable qualities of good translation. To retain Dante's tercets while avoiding a sequence of three rhymes leaves only three choices, either to rhyme the tercets as *xaa*, *aax*, or the scheme in fact adopted. This has the advantage of avoiding couplets, which never appear in the original, and producing a tercet that looks like any single one of Dante's in isolation from the others. I am not surprised that Ciardi came up with the same solution, since it is inevitable for anyone who chooses to rhyme without reproducing the original's form. In any case, poets do not patent stanzaic forms. If they did, all poets since Dante who used the *terza rima* that was his invention were plagiarists, which is an absurdity.

The second charge has to do with a presumed theft of some lines of Ciardi. In the lines Mr. Stefanile excerpts the greatest similarity comes in the phrase "for perhaps you plan to count them," which is supposed to correspond to Ciardi's "if you mean perhaps to count them." It shouldn't be necessary to point out that the number of solutions to translation problems are not infinite and that similarities between *all* Englishings of Dante can be discovered. To see what I mean, suppose we compare Ciardi's version of the same lines to Longfellow's:

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But said Virgilius: "What dost thou still gaze at?
Why is thy sight still riveted down there
Among the mournful, mutilated shades?
Thou hast not done so at the other Bolge;
Consider, if to count them thou believest,
That two-and-twenty miles the valley winds,
And now the moon is underneath our feet;
Henceforth the time allotted us is brief,
And more is to be seen than what thou seest."

And Ciardi:

What are you waiting for? Why do you stare
as if you could not tear your eyes away
from the mutilated shadows passing there?

You did not act so in the other pits.
Consider—if you mean perhaps to count them—
this valley and its train of dismal spirits

winds twenty-two miles around. The moon already
is under our feet; the time we have is short,
and there is much that you have yet to see.

Each of Longfellow's tercets contains the same matter as Dante's, never spilling over or anticipating adjacent ones. Ciardi's are sometimes a line ahead or behind. Nevertheless, there are striking resemblances to Longfellow: "mutilated shades" becomes "mutilated shadows." "Thou hast not done so at the other Bolge," becomes "You did not act so at the other pits." "Consider, if to count them thou believest," becomes "Consider—if you mean perhaps to count them—." "Henceforth the time allotted us is brief" becomes "the time we have is short." Finally, "And more is to be seen than what thou seest," becomes "and there is much that you have yet to see." Pointing out these resemblances is no more difficult an operation than Mr. Stefanile's tedious comparisons of old and new translations in his review. I haven't been able to find a copy of Ciardi's translation, so I don't know whether or not his introduction acknowledges Longfellow as a source for his own work; if he didn't, he was not under any constraint to do so. There may be similarities, but these don't amount to theft. It is a serious mistake for Mr. Stefanile to serve as Minos the Judge for the poets gathered under Daniel Halpern's editorship.

Mr. Stefanile, a published poet and editor of a literary magazine, admonishes Daniel Halpern for failing to include among his translators any poet of Italian descent, and reports an assertion that few of the translator-poets know Italian. First of all, Dante would not be Dante if his relevance were less than universal: he is not an ethnic

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private club. We should remember that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was no Italy, there were only various warring city states. Dante was a citizen of Florence. By Mr. Stefanile's reasoning the ideal translator of Dante would be of Florentine descent, which rules out Longfellow, Binyon, and Sayers, translators he himself acknowledges as excellent, not to mention John Ciardi himself.

As for the Ecco poets' knowledge of the language, one of the translators grew up in Italy and is bilingual. Another I know spent several years in Italy in the sixties, speaks Italian, and has translated other Italian poets besides Dante. Four of the poets are among the best known contemporary translators from several languages, not only French, Spanish, and Portuguese, but Italian as well.

In quanto a me, ho letto la Commedia *per la prima volta nel 1964, come universitario, e d'allora in poi ho continuato di leggerlo. Firenze era la prima città che ho visitata in Italia. Durante i sette viaggi successivi, non ho mancato a cercare i siti danteschi, il suo libro sempre a mano. Ho imparato a memoria i passagi che mi hanno sembrato specialmente belli. Posso confermare che il Dante è la fondazione per altri poeti a me importanti, per esempio, il Petrarca, Ariosto, Leopardi, Montale, e Pavese, poeti che anche loro ho tradotti. Se il signore Stefanile mi riguarda come un intruso nel* Inferno, *non posso far meglio che di citare Virgilio quando (canto III) difende il suo pupillo contra gli assalti del vecchio barcaiuolo:*

> *"Caron, non ti crucciare:*
> *Vuolsi così colà dove si puote*
> *Ciò che si vuole, e più non dimandare."*

New York, New York Alfred Corn

Felix Stefanile replies:

By a feat of mind reading I shall not attempt to challenge, Mr. Corn deduces that my review of the Ecco Press Dante, termed by him an *attack*, is based on personal bias. He concentrates his defense of the book, however, not on my—presumably erroneous documentation, as revealed by his psychic abilities, but on an account of himself, and of the late John Ciardi, with whom he appears to be obsessed. He does offer a few wan words on the difficulties of translation, paying particular attention to the similarities rival translations beget, without once mentioning the name of Charles Singleton, who figures in my review. He expends almost as much effort on John Ciardi's work as on his own, a peculiar way of discussing my misguided judgments, since John Ciardi was not a subject of the review but a missing "fact" noted

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by me. I shall leave Mr. Corn's telepathy in the thin air of his beleaguered imagination. I must, however, quote from my review, because I know of no other way of holding Mr. Corn to my words, and I do not want readers without the Autumn issue of *The Hudson Review*, to be at a disadvantage.

Alfred Corn translated Cantos XXIX and XXX. In the context of my remarks it is interesting to read his spare one-liner about his rhyme pattern. "For Dante's hendecasyllabic terza rima I have substituted iambic pentameter, rhyming line one and three of each tercet." The absence of a Ciardi allusion, as a matter of scholarly citation, is alarming. Let us leave the valley of the Ghosts of Unmention by quoting both Ciardi and Corn:

This is all I care to say about Mr. Corn, and he appears nowhere else in my essay. My purpose in presenting the two quotations is abundantly clear and is preceded by a section in which I note that John Ciardi is not mentioned at all in the Ecco Press book. I wanted to make the record public that John Ciardi was Mr. Corn's precursor in the use of the *axa* stanza for translating Dante.

Citation, in all writing, is an honorable and ancient practice. It is one means by which we preserve and protect history. It is a technique of knowledge, establishing facts and precedents. Reviewers of scholarly texts pay close attention to citation, or its absence, as a method of assessment. Professors do the same thing, as do lawyers. There are several worthy modern translations of Dante available to us. Few have had the impact of the work of John Ciardi. His versions are still used in the schools, as are those of others. To leave John Ciardi's name out of the Ecco Press Dante is to leave a thirty-year gap in Dante studies in America. Readers and students, especially those new to Dante, have a right to know that John Ciardi's Dante exists. To Mr. Corn's consternation, I tell them so. I say nothing about Mr. Corn's "lines," and Mr. Corn knows this.

His invocation of the names of eminent poets who freely use the *axa* stanza as a way of protecting himself is vapid. He does not answer my point: he failed to cite.

It will not be lost on readers that although Mr. Corn sets John Ciardi and Longfellow side by side, he does not evince the same sensitivity to readers concerning the accessibility of his own lines—see my review—of the same Dante passage; all three poets figure in his dispute with me. Here we may have to take his word. As for his words on translation, they are bland. All translators know that there are only so many ways of not calling a loaf of bread a loaf of bread in any language, including one's own. This problem of similarities was not the point of my observations; uninspired writing was. In at least two cases, I never even got to comment on strategies for similarities. There my rueful duty was not to report on uninspired writing, but work that was simply execrable translation.

As for John Ciardi's possible misdeeds, as tremulously described by Mr. Corn, I cannot agree with him. "Mutilated shadows" is not a

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similarity; it is grand theft. T. S. Eliot, with his witty dictum on the difference between poets who plagiarize and poets who steal, would have approved. Substituting the word "shadows" for "shades" rescues Longfellow's succinct phrase for contemporary use by sidestepping the delicate archaism. Both John Ciardi and Longfellow are superior to Mr. Corn on this image. Mr. Corn fails to supply his phrase in his letter, "the sad dismemberment of souls," which is blowsy, hypersibilantly calls attention to itself and not to the picture, and sounds like escaping gas. As for "the time we have is short," no one in the world will convince me that this plain English resembles Longfellow's line. But enough of this palaver: the time we have is short.

Mr. Corn's factitiousness cracks at the seams in his coda on Dante, the non-Italianicity of Italians, and the demurrer I raise in my review that the Ecco Press collection included "no gifted and notable American poet of Italian descent," an omission I continue to find surprising. He once more shifts the terms of the debate and hints darkly that I am proposing the ethnic Dante-cleansing of the translators of the world. As he did concerning the *axa* stanza earlier in his letter, he trots out the eminent names of poet-translators, innocently non-Italian, to support his cause. His capsule history of an Italy made up of individuals insensible to concepts of national identity would be ludicrous, if it were not so callous. Though he claims, in his eloquent close, which he pens in Italian, to have read and translated Petrarch, it becomes a matter of great melancholy to me that he seems not to have come across Petrarch's renowned canzone, which begins *Italia mia, ben che 'l parlar sia indarno . . .* (My Italy, though to call you so is of no use . . .). This is but one example of the vast literature, extant centuries before Mr. Corn, that testifies to the yearning of the people of Italy for nationhood. His resort to the tactics of graffiti to bedeck his spurious Italian and non-Italian context, is beneath contempt and requires no further explication from me. The close of this peroration with the deracination of John Ciardi, is the gambit of a sophomore at the end of a bad answer in class.

The rest is epilogue. Mr. Corn's count of Ecco Press poets who "know" Italian contributes nothing to the sense of my review and would have been better directed to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, where the legend of the Ecco Press Dante appeared, full page. He follows this up with his own composition in Italian, offered with the flourish of a Ph.D. candidate supplying evidence of familiarity with a foreign language. It is, perhaps, an example of "the culture of tourism" I ascribe as one of the main features of the Ecco Press book. Mr. Corn has visited Italy seven times already. He has roamed the sites Dante roamed, with his *Commedia* always in hand. Goethe could not have asked for more.

The letter ends with Dante's lines exhorting Charon, the dreadful boatman, to let the travelers to Hell pass. Mr. Corn intends the quotation for me, and not, I hasten to add, for *Hudson Review* readers.

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I accept his address as forlorn recognition of my labors in ferrying so much dead weight in completing my review of the Ecco Press Dante. I return Mr. Corn's courtesy in kind, with my own translation of another passage from Dante:

> Now my speech will slacken, and arrest
> Remembrance even, feebler than a babe
> Whose tongue still dribbles at his mother's breast.[1]

[1] *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 11. 106–108.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

THOMAS M. DISCH's latest novel, *The Priest: A Gothic Romance*, will be published early next year. He has another novel in mind. . . . BRIAN COX has been appointed Honorary Fellow at Westminster College, Oxford. He has recently published his autobiography, *The Great Betrayal*. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON has two books scheduled for publication in 1994: a collection of "Essays and Notes on Poetry" titled *Ships Going into the Blue* (University of Michigan Press), and a book of memoirs, *The King My Father's Wreck* (Story Line). Several of the memoirs were first published in *The Hudson Review*. . . . MONROE K. SPEARS wrote "Cosmology and the Writer" as a lecture for the

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Sewanee Writers' Conference in 1993. His latest book is *Countries of the Mind: Literary Explorations* (University of Missouri Press, 1992). He was inducted into the South Carolina Academy of Authors and the Fellowship of Southern Writers in 1993. . . . MARGARET LALLY* is an associate professor of English at The Citadel. Her chapter on D.H. Lawrence appears in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (University of Virginia Press, 1993). . . . CORTNEY DAVIS* lives in Redding, Connecticut and is a nurse practitioner in the Women's Health Center at Danbury Hospital. Her chapbook, "The Body Flute," will be published by Adastra Press late this year. . . . ROBERT HILL LONG,* who lives in Oregon, is author of *The Power to Die.*

JOHN FINLAY, whose "Flaubert in Egypt" was published in the Autumn 1983 issue of *The Hudson Review*, died in 1991. A collection of his essays, *Hermetic Light: The Gnostic Spirit in Modern Literature*, edited by David Middleton, has just been published by John Daniel & Company, Publishers this year. . . . MADELEINE MYSKO* is a recent graduate of The Writing Seminars of The Johns Hopkins University, and now teaches there. . . . SAMUEL HAZO is the Director of the International Poetry Forum and Professor of English at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. His most recent book of poems is *The Past Won't Stay Behind You.* . . . ALLEN HOEY is the author of two collections of poems: *A Fire in the Cold House of Being* (the Walt Whitman Center, 1987) and *What Persists* (Liberty Street Books, 1992). . . . PATRICIA GOEDICKE's tenth book of poetry, *Paul Bunyan's Bearskin* (Milkweed Editions) will be reviewed in our Summer issue. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program of the University of Montana. . . . HENRY HART,* author of books about Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney, is at work on a study of Robert Lowell. He is editor of *Verse.*

DAVID DOOLEY's second book of poems, *The Revenge by Love*, is scheduled for publication in 1995. . . . THOMAS FILBIN is a free lance critic who lives in Massachusetts. . . . Having finished a book on Virginia Woolf, SONYA RUDIKOFF is now working on Mrs. Humphry Ward and other late nineteenth-century feminists and anti-feminists. . . . TOM WILHELMUS is Associate Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Southern Indiana and co-directs the Rope-Walk Writers Retreat with poet Matthew Graham. . . . ALAN DAVIS is the editor of *American Fiction* and the author of *Rumors from the Lost World*, a collection of stories published by New Rivers Press in 1993. . . . TESS LEWIS is a writer and translator living in New York. Her next piece in *The Hudson Review* will be a review of Theodore Ziolkowski's *Virgil and the Moderns.* . . . ROBERT McDOWELL, author of *Quiet Money*, is publisher and editor of Story Line Press. . . . DAVID MASON teaches at Moorhead State University in Minnesota.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The Yaddo simulation blew a gigantic smoke ring toward the assembled participants, which dissolved into purple fizz as it reached the perceptual boundary of holographic space. It leaned forward and seemed to look at each participant directly in his or her eyes.

"Let's be honest with each other," it said. "Nobody likes to read. Okay?"

—Thomas M. Disch, "The Man Who Read a Book," p. 11.

Auden mythologized the human realm as that of Clio, Muse of History, overlapping with but distinct from the realm of Dame Kind, or Mother Nature. In the light of this distinction, [Stephen] Hawking's title—*A Brief History of Time*—is a misnomer: time, in the cosmological sense, has no history; history pertains only to what has human significance. The Big Bang is noise, part of nature; what is peculiarly human is language or silence.

—Monroe K. Spears, "Cosmology and the Writer," p. 29.

The democracy had always both loved and hated the man, fatally drawn to him and repelled at the same time—he had been the spoiled child of the democracy—and in the irresolution of its contradictory emotions Alcibiades had eluded its justice and escaped punishment for his outrages. Besides, he was now dead. But who was that old man who had been ceaselessly at his side during all his youth, the one who had insultingly pitted aristocratic skill and knowledge against democratic incompetence and mere belief?

—John Finlay, "The Night of Alcibiades," p. 57.

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